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Managing disasters

HEAVY monsoon rains during the last month have caused significant loss of life and property across the provinces. According to the daily situation report by the NDMA on Monday, torrential rains, and the ensuing flooding and landslides in different parts of the country have killed at least 163 people, including 66 children, since mid-June. Most rain-related deaths — 61 — were reported from Sindh where urban flooding in Karachi is said to have killed almost 50 people. Scores of villages in that province were reported to have been submerged, with the provincial government declaring 20 districts as 'calamity hit'. In KP, the death toll, according to the NDMA, had spiked to 48 by Sunday, while fatalities in Balochistan, Punjab, GB and AJK were 17, 16, 11 and 10 respectively. Intense rains and subsequent flash floods are also to blame for the damage to nearly 1,600 houses — mainly in Balochistan and KP — in addition to the destruction of roads, schools and public hospitals. Hundreds of affected people have been displaced and had to be evacuated and shifted to safety. Many in the rural areas of Sindh and elsewhere lost their crops while scores of tourists were stranded in the north owing to road closures following landslides.

Over the last several years, floods of varying intensity have become an annual feature in Pakistan, largely because of the changing climate, environmental degradation and deforestation. Similarly, urban flooding has become a regular threat for residents of cities owing to poor town planning and lack of investment in infrastructure. On top of that, the performance of national, provincial and district institutions responsible for disaster management has been less than satisfactory when it comes to extending relief to affected communities and helping in their rehabilitation. Little has changed in this sphere even after the creation of disaster management bodies at the national and provincial levels after the devastating Kashmir earthquake in 2005. Several factors such as shortage of financial resources to acquire machinery and equipment needed for rescue work, as well as lack of trained manpower, are said to be responsible for their poor performance whenever disaster strikes.

The situation demands that the government formulate an integrated strategy for mitigating and managing disasters like floods instead of confining its response to just providing relief to the affected people, which can never be

adequate. It is time the federal and provincial governments moved beyond piecemeal, isolated flood-management measures, which have until now been limited mostly to annual repairs of flood-protection embankments. The long-term strategy should focus on strengthening the flood forecast system based on the extensive use of technology — such as the telemetry system — for more accurate weather and flood predictions to protect vulnerable communities. That should be followed by developing the disaster management authorities' capacity so that they can provide timely relief to those affected and rehabilitate them as quickly as possible.

Plan for Karachi

A FEW days after Karachi was lashed by record-breaking rains, there is a palpable feeling of rage amongst this hapless city's residents. This is not without reason, for in the face of a devastating calamity the people have been left to fend for themselves by those who wield power in this country.

Extreme weather events happen all over the globe, yet damage is mitigated by planning ahead and ensuring that all humanly possible measures are taken to protect lives and property. But in Karachi's case, these measures are mostly limited to press statements — or the distinct lack of them — and the federal, provincial and local governments seem far more interested in attacking each other's performance than in solving the city's problems.

However, in the wake of the latest disaster, there seems to be a change in tone, with the prime minister himself paying attention to the crisis in the country's commercial capital. On Monday, Imran Khan said he wanted a "Karachi Transformation Plan" finalised soon, while earlier he had stated that the centre would "not abandon" Karachi in times of crises.

This resolve to prevent such disasters from happening again in Karachi is commendable, and to underscore his commitment Mr Khan should visit the metropolis as soon as he can to witness the devastation for himself. Under the prime minister's plan, the city's key issues — solid waste management, water shortage, matters related to water and sewerage as well as transport — will be focused on.

From here on, both the federal and Sindh governments need to put politics aside and combine forces to help bring Karachi into the 21st century. The neglect of this city has gone on for decades, and this sad fact was manifested most painfully last Thursday when Karachi's entire infrastructure collapsed and was seemingly washed away by the monsoon deluge.

Monday also marked the day when the tenure of local governments ended in Sindh. Along with coming up with a workable master plan for Karachi with the centre, the Sindh government must take the provincial local bodies law back to the drawing board. The SLGA 2013 has been a miserable failure, especially in Karachi, as the third tier has been eviscerated by a provincial government that has usurped all civic powers.

If meaningful change is to come to Karachi, the Sindh administration must give back civic powers to an elected mayor, while maintaining checks and balances on the third tier.

Fast unto death

THE recent death of Turkish lawyer Ebru Timtik after a 238-day hunger strike, is yet another tragic event in a country whose human rights record is rapidly worsening. Timtik's colleagues said she died in hospital; she had been transferred there from jail where she had been observing a protracted 'death fast'. Timtik had been demanding a fair trial after she was convicted in 2018 and sentenced to 13 years in prison for being a member of the outlawed DHKP/C. The sentence was upheld last October by a Turkish appeals court. At the time of her passing, it emerged that Timtik weighed only 30 kg. Her end encapsulates the anger and frustration of many activists, journalists and independent thinkers in an atmosphere of censorship and flawed court trials. Her death follows the similar fate of two left-wing folk musicians in Turkey in April and May.

Timtik's story is yet another indictment of a democracy in darkness. For the past four years, the Erdogan-led Turkish government has orchestrated an intensified crackdown against critics and the press. The suppression of free speech has been characterised by mass arrests, swift convictions, sweeping police powers, book bans and censorship, the blocking of social media sites and shutting down of websites critical of the government. Journalists and

activists who managed to escape the climate of fear now live outside Turkey and campaign desperately for those facing the wrath of an authoritarian government. The ruling AKP's clampdown on perceived opponents, which began after a failed military coup in 2016, extended to the courts which are now being criticised for favouring the government in its rulings. That Turkey — where freedom of expression is a constitutional right — has become a closed, stifling and dangerous place for dissenters even after shaking off the military's interference, is a depressing reality. In a functional democracy, individuals must be able to live without fear of punishment for or censorship of their beliefs and their spoken or written words. Sadly in Turkey, that is far from the reality.

Pak-Afghan dialogue

THOUGH Pakistan and Afghanistan share a border, as well as historical, cultural and demographic ties, the relationship has been less than cordial in the modern era. Ties were especially strained during the Afghan jihad, as the pro-Soviet government in Kabul at the time and Islamabad were in two diametrically opposed ideological camps, with this country backing the Mujahideen. Later, while Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognise the Afghan Taliban's rule over Afghanistan, ties failed to improve after the Americans sent the armed Islamist group packing in late 2001. However, the process initiated through the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, which started in 2018, offers both sides a chance to help improve ties in a mutually beneficial manner. Bilateral meetings under this framework were held in Kabul on Monday, with the foreign secretary leading the Pakistani delegation.

The action plan covers a gamut of areas, namely political and diplomatic exchanges, military ties as well as the economic sphere. Indeed, if such high-level exchanges continue regularly, the mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad can be reduced and a more constructive relationship can be built. This will no doubt be difficult, as there are some in Kabul's corridors of power that bear a long-standing grudge against Pakistan, while certain states in the region will not want Afghanistan and this country to forge closer ties. These irritants must be ignored and both capitals must work hard to improve relations. While some in Kabul may criticise Pakistan for 'supporting' the

Afghan Taliban, the fact is that the armed group is an undeniable reality on the Afghan political scene, which is why even the US — which politically and militarily backs the Afghan government — has signed a peace deal with the militia. The foreign secretary reiterated this reality when he told his interlocutors in Kabul that intra-Afghan peace must be pursued with “perseverance and unflinching commitment”.

Moreover, the presence of the self-styled Islamic State group in ungoverned parts of Afghanistan is a grave security threat for both countries, as well as the region. In fact, some of this country’s most notorious terrorists have taken refuge with their ideological comrades across the border. Let both capitals work together to eliminate this common threat, along with pushing forward the Afghan peace process. Also, in future if any misunderstanding does emerge between the two sides, let them discuss it through diplomatic channels in a rational manner, instead of resorting to mudslinging in full public view. It would be naive to assume that mutual distrust will melt away overnight. However, the action plan is an excellent forum to resolve thorny issues standing in the way of better ties. It is hoped that this forum is utilised to its full potential, and that a more cordial chapter is opened in Pak-Afghan ties marked by trust and cooperation.

Residents’ protest

LAST week’s monsoon rains in Karachi have wreaked havoc on its upscale and lower-income areas alike. Well-heeled residents of the ‘posh’ Defence Housing Authority, furious at the collapse of civic services on account of the downpour, gathered on Monday to protest outside the office of the Cantonment Board Clifton which provides municipal cover to DHA (and a large number of other localities within its jurisdiction). They demanded that top DHA and CBC officials resign, that inundated areas in Defence Society be drained and water, gas and power supplies restored expeditiously. In the long run, they pressed for the reconstruction of infrastructure, accountability of officials and a forensic audit of CBC and DHA accounts. At one point, irked by the absence of any CBC or DHA official to come and speak with them, the protesters forced their way into the building, leaving the policemen present at the site flummoxed as to how to respond to a mob comprising the ‘elite’.

After decades of neglect, a sustained improvement in Karachi's civic services can only be achieved through comprehensive, structural reform. Piecemeal and superficial measures, taken along the same fragmented lines of authority as exist today in the city are not the answer. The metropolis must have a unified command structure for consistency of services and accountability of personnel. In the administrative hotchpotch that prevails at present, everyone passes the buck and no one is held responsible. Some anomalies are immediately obvious, such as the jurisdiction of cantonments, of which there are six in Karachi. As per the Cantonment Act 1924, cantonments are defined as "any place ... in which any part of the regular forces or the regular air force of Pakistan is quartered ... or is required for the service of such forces...". With reference to Monday's protest, what is the rationale for Clifton Cantonment to sprawl over an area of 9,953 acres when its operational area is only 58 acres? To comply with the law would also mean a belated implementation of a Supreme Court judgement in 2007 that ordered civilian areas to be excluded from the cantonment boards through a notification by the defence ministry. With the prime minister to shortly visit Karachi, this is the time for the Sindh government to demonstrate its willingness to appoint a fully empowered city administrator. There must be a governance pyramid for the metropolis, with the administrator's office at the very top.

Qatar's labour changes

THE migrant workers of Qatar have lifted the trophy well ahead of the FIFA World Cup scheduled to be played in 2022 in the Gulf country. The government in Doha has just done away with a law that made the employer's consent mandatory to switch jobs. Along with this, the workers will be entitled to a minimum wage of 1,000 Qatari riyals (\$274). Qatar's hosting of the international sporting event brought it into sharp focus on the global stage. This proved to be a boon for labour rights unions in the country where migrant workers were beholden to the kafeel or sponsor for whatever jobs they managed to land. The no-objection certificate that they required in order to change jobs was a favour the sponsor could easily deny them, leaving the employees vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation in a foreign land. It will soon be possible for any employer or employee in Qatar to end a contract by providing a month's "written notice in the first two years of the contract or

two months' notice beyond the second year of the contract". Errant employers will face penalties far more severe than the ones that have been in place until now.

To get an idea of just how ungenerous these bosses can be, the unprecedented relief announced by the government provides for an amount of 500 riyals for accommodation and 300 riyals for food, if these are not given directly. This is a case which highlights the urgency to not just simplify but also humanise the rules that affect so many lives. All this could have a huge impact on Qatar which is seeking greater economic openness to attract investment. The 2022 football tournament could well turn out to be one of the many goals of excellence for the ambitious country. Also, these new labour laws could blaze a trail for workers stuck in extremely oppressive conditions in other Gulf states where the same kafala or sponsorship system is in place.

Time to come back

IN addition to the political necessity of his return, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif must now comply with the Islamabad High Court's decision that he appear before the judges by Sept 10. The court agrees with the argument that Mr Sharif can no more be considered on bail and could well carry the absconder's tag if he fails to face the law within the stipulated period. The PML-N's first reaction to the ruling has been in line with its position on Mr Sharif's stay abroad after the legal battle that had eventually managed to get him out of jail. The party says that "Mian sahib wants to come back ... but he will only return after the completion of his treatment". This is where the debate once more enters the complicated phase as alien-sounding medical terms clash with the legal lingo thrown in by the opposing lawyers.

However, the political choice before one of the country's most popular and influential leaders — and one who is leading one of its biggest political parties — should be clear-cut: accept the challenge and return to take command of an opposition that has been stuck in a rut. Where the PML-N is concerned, matters have been allowed to stagnate for far too long and it makes little political sense for Mr Sharif to stay away, letting the entire ruling set-up comprising Prime Minister Imran Khan, the PTI and government allies

take regular aim at a confused and divided PML-N. If this is indeed the right prescription for the PML-N, it is very likely that the Sharifs who virtually own their creation may not agree with the course. They might still opt for a tactic that keeps Mr Sharif secure and away from jail — a strategy that would be in conformity with its usual practice of playing it safe. In contrast, the new-wave PML-N advisers say that this old style is not suited to the current PML-N realities and the role that is demanded of it.

The legal and medical mumbo jumbo that surrounds Mr Sharif may protect the PML-N leader from the pains of incarceration. It may also give him and his closest associates, including his daughter Maryam Nawaz, some unwanted publicity as adventurers not really going for the target wholeheartedly. It is a mystery what deal had landed an evidently ailing Mr Sharif in London. That was then but of late it had appeared that Ms Nawaz, an echo of her father, had finally chosen to assert herself in national politics. Any step at this moment that appears to seek some kind of relief from the system under the incumbent rulers could come across as a sign of weakness to many in the crowd. The politically savvy would say this is a time for standing with and ahead of others against what the Pakistani opposition calls witch-hunting.

Saving the deal

DUE mostly to the rash decisions of the Trump administration, the Iran nuclear deal has been dealt several mortal blows, and if urgent measures are not taken, the agreement may soon be history. However, some positive movement was made in this regard on Tuesday when the other signatories of the deal — minus the US, which pulled out in 2018 — met in Vienna. An EU official who chaired the talks tweeted that the participants of the meeting were “united in resolve to preserve” the agreement. Moreover, a Chinese official commented that while Tehran needed to return to “full compliance ... the economic benefit that is due to Iran needs to be provided”. The Chinese official also criticised the US for “making a mockery of international law [in its] attempt to sabotage ... the JCPOA”, using the official abbreviation of the deal.

Clearly, in the opinion of the deal’s signatories, including some of America’s closest allies in Europe, the nuclear agreement is worth saving. This serves

as a strong critique of Donald Trump's foreign policy, particularly his handling of the Iran file, as the world community is in no mood to see a fresh confrontation emerge in the Middle East. Moreover, Iran did the right thing recently by allowing IAEA inspectors access to a number of suspected nuclear sites. As the world continues to be battered by health and economic crises, instead of fanning the flames all states need to find diplomatic solutions to geopolitical problems. This is exactly what the JCPOA was designed to do, until the Trump White House did all it could to scuttle the deal. As the US presidential election approaches, Mr Trump and his advisers may try to look even tougher on Iran to please the evangelicals, a key component of the US president's vote bank. However, enough damage has been done in this regard. The deal must be saved, which is why the US should abandon its confrontational posture and let Iran resume economic activities with the world. If Tehran — under tremendous strain due to US sanctions — fails to reap the financial benefits of the deal, it may also abandon it, as its leaders have clearly indicated. To prevent such a scenario, the signatories of the JCPOA must continue to pressure the US to return to the deal. The next few months will show whether diplomacy triumphs, or bellicosity carries the day where the nuclear deal is concerned.

Covid-19 complacency

GOING by the ease and laxity with which public gatherings are taking place in the country, it is as if the Covid-19 pandemic were over. This is far from the truth. The coronavirus is still very much a threat in Pakistan and the reasons for the miraculously lowered curve remain a mystery. Recent stats are noteworthy: on Wednesday, the figures on the NCOC website showed that 18 people had succumbed to the virus in the previous 24 hours while 441 had tested positive. Active Covid-19 cases across cities stand at over 8,800 — a figure which can multiply given the high transmissibility rate of the virus. Despite this, public gatherings continue unabated, with little care for distancing and mask-wearing. WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned this week: "No country can just pretend the pandemic is over." He said, "The reality is this virus spreads easily. Opening up without control is a recipe for disaster."

This advisory should be taken very seriously by the federal and provincial governments, who must keep a watchful eye on the Covid-19 graph — especially in light of schools' reopening and last week's flood relief efforts and Muharram processions. With the resumption of economic activity, distancing and SOPs must be followed by small and large businesses, especially where more than a handful of people are expected to gather. Authorities must be vigilant about monitoring and enforcing the rules. They should also acknowledge that it is unclear what has lowered Pakistan's Covid-19 curve and that carelessness can push the country back to the dark days where a rapid spread forced shutdowns. There are many cities where second waves have occurred because of a failure to communicate with the public and the flouting of SOPs. Here, contingency plans are key to mitigating the devastating impact that Covid-19 and ensuing lockdowns can have on the healthcare infrastructure and economy. We cannot afford to be careless. At no point should the celebration and relief of having avoided an all-out disaster lull the authorities into a false sense of security.

Prison reform

INMATES of jails in Pakistan do not often have a reason to collectively rejoice, but a humane decision by the federal government will have many female prisoners doing precisely that. Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday directed the relevant authorities to prepare for the early release of under-trial women and those who continue to remain behind bars only because they are unable to pay petty fines. He said the government would pay the fines outstanding against female prisoners whose remaining sentences are less than three years so they could be released immediately. It appears that his directive also extends to the release of juvenile prisoners behind bars for minor crimes. The prime minister's words constitute a movement towards compliance with a Supreme Court ruling in April which ordered the government to set free inmates suffering from mental or physical illness, under-trial inmates 55 years or older, male under-trial prisoners without any past convictions, and women and juvenile prisoners. The measure also brings us a little closer to our international human rights obligations.

A civilised society is that which respects the inviolable dignity of man, even of individuals incarcerated for heinous crimes. By that measure, Pakistan scores very poorly. A number of studies have delved into the abominable conditions inside the country's jails. Most recently, a commission set up late last year by the Islamabad High Court to look into the violation of human rights violations in the prison system uncovered a plethora of disturbing facts. Those behind bars find themselves subject to daily indignities and deprivations that constitute no less than a sub-human existence. According to the commission's report, which it submitted to the IHC in January this year, more than 5,000 out of a total of 73,661 prisoners were afflicted with some form of disease: 2,100 suffered from physical ailments, while nearly 2,400 were infected with contagious diseases such as HIV, hepatitis and tuberculosis. Additionally, around 600 prisoners suffer from psychological disorders. Shockingly, almost 50pc of the medical jail staff posts were lying vacant, and there was a shortage of appropriate medical equipment and laboratories.

An earlier report, presented to the Supreme Court in November 2019, allows a fuller picture to emerge, one that is both horrific and heartbreaking. According to its findings, 77,275 prisoners are held in 114 jails across Pakistan — well beyond their capacity of 57,742 inmates. Research suggests that intolerably overcrowded living conditions can be a catalyst for aggression and antisocial behaviour that may persist even after prisoners are released into society. Worse, a vast majority of these individuals are undertrials, caught in a shambolic system where the judicial process often takes years to complete. Even for those who are found innocent, their lives are irrevocably altered by their ordeal. It is heartening that there seems to finally be a momentum in favour of prison reform.

Devastation in KP

THIS year's thundering monsoon and the subsequent loss of life and property have once again exposed our inability to prepare for and manage natural disasters. The total death toll from rain-related damage in the country since mid-June has crossed 170 while heavy rainfall continues to batter several areas.

With the latest spell of rain claiming over 20 lives in Hazara and Malakand divisions of KP, the total number of deaths in the province has surpassed those in Sindh. Heavy landslides and flash floods have destroyed a large number of homes, several schools and other structures, and have damaged the road and communications network in Chitral, Swat, Shangla, Kohistan, Lower Dir, Charsadda, Mardan and other areas.

There have also been at least three extreme weather events during the past two months. On Aug 28, flash floods resulting from a cloudburst in Swat valley swept away around 45 houses while killing at least 11 people. Meanwhile, in Chitral, two glacial lake outbursts — one on July 13 and the other on Aug 14 — also resulted in considerable losses.

The recurring floods that have been worsening over the years combined with these freak weather events are a clear warning to the authorities to take effective measures to limit the impact of climate change in the country.

Pakistan is among the top 10 countries most vulnerable to the deadly effects of global warming. While in KP the provincial rescue departments have been prompt in their response to the crises and are providing relief to the affected people, the general state of the disaster management infrastructure in the country leaves a lot to be desired.

Since changing climate patterns and measures to mitigate their effect are not taken into account while preparing a plan for disaster management, the collective effort is ad hoc and often an exercise in futility. With no sustainable solutions, such short-term measures come at great expense in terms of resources. What the country needs is an integrated disaster prevention and management system that takes into consideration both prevention and preparedness.

For this, help can be sought from the federal climate change ministry to pinpoint the risk factors and vulnerable areas. Moreover, the authorities would also need to invest in the latest equipment for accurate weather forecasts and capacity building of disaster management authorities' staff so that they can plan beyond mundane relief measures to guard against the perennial loss of life and property.

Not much to celebrate

IT took a wide full-length ball from Haris Rauf at Old Trafford on Tuesday evening to ensure that Pakistan ended their weather-truncated tour of England on a winning note. Until this last delivery of the six-game itinerary, the tourists had had little to celebrate. There was rearguard action by Azhar Ali and Muhammad Rizwan that combined with rain to save a Test match for Pakistan, even though they lost the series 0-1. The high point was when the national side, which had a battery of guides and mentors including former greats in the team management, was just five wickets away from winning the first Test. The lowest came not too long afterwards — when Jos Buttler and Chris Woakes stole the very first game from a hapless bunch that suddenly appeared to have lost all sense of how to compete. England played brilliantly with the bat while Pakistan's bowlers left their fans disappointed. Even with the great Waqar Younis and wily Mushtaq Ahmed as coaches, the bowlers failed to rise to the occasion. The team's batting was erratic, and could have suffered because of excessive reliance on the burdened Babar Azam.

The subsequent T20 series was relatively less disturbed by the elements but again the bowlers gave away a lot of runs. A game was abandoned because of rain and England won a match when the visitors failed to defend a hefty 195. Pakistan won the third match by a difference of just five runs. Debutant Haider Ali shone with a 50, but the old war horses Muhammad Hafeez and Wahab Riaz were the ones who forcefully wrested it for Pakistan from the tight English grip. Which means that whereas a new star may have been found, the call for retiring all seniors in one go makes little sense. Unfortunately, this latest expedition to the birthplace of cricket failed to throw up any clues as to why a Fawad Alam or Sarfaraz Ahmed is selected and why a Muhammad Rizwan is dropped.

Circular debt woes

IN November last year, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Finance and Revenue Hafeez Shaikh claimed that the circular debt would be eliminated by the end of 2020. His colleague Special Assistant Nadeem Babar has also made similar predictions on multiple occasions. Mr Babar asserts that the

government has arrested the pace of monthly increase in the circular debt, bringing it down to around Rs10bn-12bn from nearly Rs38bn during the last years of the PML-N government.

Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence to contradict such assertions. A Senate panel was informed by power ministry officials the other day that the power sector's liability had spiked by a hefty Rs538bn or 33.4pc to more than Rs2.1tr during the last financial year. The average monthly build-up of almost Rs45bn in the overall volume of the debt during the last fiscal is way higher than what the government had projected.

The pace of increase has been even faster than what the PTI 'inherited'. The total debt stock has almost doubled in two years under the PTI. During the Senate hearing, the government team blamed Covid-19 for the shortfall of Rs240bn in the collection of bills and the sharp rise in debt. Even if their explanation is accepted, the pace of accumulation of arrears has still been substantially more rapid than the claims made by the government.

The origins of the circular debt — the amount of cash shortfall within the Central Power Purchasing Agency that the latter is unable to pay to its power suppliers — go far back in time and successive rulers must share the blame for the huge mess in the country's power sector.

It is a collective failure which is now threatening the nation's fiscal stability and penalising consumers through far higher electricity tariffs compared to other countries in the region. The sad part is the PTI government's inability to come up with anything resembling a reform plan to contain the debt during its two years in power.

It has pursued the same old strategy of raising consumer electricity prices and resorting to revenue-based blackouts — just like its predecessors. In June, it moved a bill to secure the power to impose surcharges on consumer electricity tariffs and special wheeling charges on industrial consumers to control the debt build-up. Recently, it has forced several private power producers to accept a reduction in their returns through changes in their agreements with the CPPA-G to slow down the accumulation of arrears.

Few believe such actions will work. Instead, the expert opinion is that such short-term 'solutions' have taken the focus away from the real issues plaguing the sector — high distribution losses, widespread electricity theft,

massive unrecovered bills, and so on. It is an untenable situation. What is needed urgently is a plan to liquidate existing stocks and a strategy to stop its further accumulation without burdening the consumers.

Torture bill

ONE hopes that Prime Minister Imran Khan will follow up on his announcement that a bill against torture would be introduced soon in parliament. Thousands of people in the country are subjected to torture — all too often by the law enforcers themselves. Purging the criminal justice system of this sadistic practice is a challenge that needs to be addressed immediately. The prime minister made his announcement on Twitter and stated that torture was “unacceptable in a civilised society”. He instructed the interior ministry to accelerate the process of presenting the anti-torture bill in the National Assembly. He also asserted that torture tactics were against the spirit of Islam and the Constitution and a violation of Pakistan’s international legal obligations.

It has been over a decade since Pakistan signed the Convention against Torture, and it must now take its commitment further. Torture is endemic in the country, whether in the criminal justice system or society in general. Police officials routinely employ it to extract ‘confessions’ from suspects or ‘punish’ them, something that the courts themselves have acknowledged. The case of Salahuddin Ayubi last year is just one of many incidents where victims have died in police custody. It is this mindset that lends ‘legitimacy’ to the extended detention of suspects at internment centres and allows police officials to maintain safe houses that operate under the radar for the very purpose of violating the basic rights of suspects in horrible ways. Meanwhile, as the case of the 10-year-old domestic worker Tayyaba demonstrated, torture is a part of society. Indeed, there are numerous examples that never come to light both in official and private spheres, and justice for the victims is rare. All too often, the perpetrators escape the accountability process — unless a hue and cry is raised. While finalising the draft of the anti-torture bill, the interior ministry should take guidance from the report of the UN Committee against Torture regarding Pakistan’s compliance with the provisions of the convention. Besides completely prohibiting torture, the authorities also need to train police officers in forensic evidence gathering and alternate interrogation techniques. Strict

punishment should be ensured for law enforcers irrespective of how well-connected or high-ranking they may be. One hopes that the authorities will act promptly and justly, and not put this issue on the back-burner. The promised bill must see the light of day if Pakistan is to be perceived as a progressive state.

No bail for media mogul

THERE seems to be no end to the ordeal of Mir Shakilur Rehman, editor-in-chief of the Jang group, who has been held by the National Accountability Bureau for six months now. On Thursday, NAB secured a non-bailable arrest warrant for former prime minister Nawaz Sharif in the same 34-year-old case regarding the allotment of more than 50 kanals of land in Lahore. This could signal just how determined the prosecutors are to stretch the proceedings and pain in what has been a trial by investigation only. Bail for Mr Rehman after he was arrested had appeared only a formality. But securing bail which is usually considered the right of a person under probe has proven to be an impossible task in his case. All Mr Rehman's attempts, including the latest on Thursday, to secure this fundamental relief have been frustrated. The protests, the urgent reminders about health risks and advice on how the government must not allow the case to sully its reputation appear to have made little impact.

The latest development came as Prime Minister Imran Khan's remarks on the freedom of expression echoed through the air. In an interview with a Gulf channel, the premier denied any breach between him and the modern ideals of a free media. He remarked that his government had come under the severest criticism from the press in Pakistan and implied that he knew what all this was about thanks to the years he had spent in England. It goes without saying that the rulers' understanding of freedom and rights should extend to other spheres of national life as well — including the justice system. The government must have sensed the growing unease on the streets and thus must try to avoid 'unnecessary' confrontations that long delays in prosecution and holding people indefinitely in custody even before their trial has started can lead to. The rulers are only feeding the general perception that a media figure is being punished for reasons other than what he has been accused of.

A common agenda?

WILL they or won't they meet on Sept 20 in Islamabad? Even the staunchest supporters of an anti-government movement at this point would be reluctant to bet on the smooth holding of the multiparty conference that is scheduled to be hosted by the PPP leadership. The predictions regarding the outcome of the meeting will have to wait for a more confidence-inspiring moment. The holding of the event itself has turned into a challenge and it is not clear whether the invitees have got the host of their choice. Reports say that some smaller aspiring partners in this 'developing' opposition alliance had wished to partake of Shahbaz Sharif's hospitality as he is the opposition leader in parliament. However, Mr Sharif, as everyone knows by now, has been acting like a reluctant groom who repeatedly shies away from most rituals that are integral to marriages of convenience in the country.

Mr Sharif himself would have perhaps preferred a meaningful opposition inside the National Assembly — and the new parliamentary session might provide him an opportunity to ensure one. In fact, it is what most Pakistanis wary of street agitation would be hoping for, and it is indeed the path to a robust democracy. The long attritional test that the PTI put the country to during its dharna days before the elections came at a cost. The memory of that time has acted as a deterrent against a similar adventure, even against the ruling PTI itself. But it's also true that if the political parties want to take the fight outside parliament, they would be within their democratic right to do so. The PTI must shoulder the blame for such aspirations, given that it has hardly ever indicated that it wanted parliament to function as a legislative assembly should. Right from the beginning, the ruling party has had no respect for the opposition.

But while the government has given the opposition a reason to unify by branding both the PPP and PML-N as corrupt, the two main parties are often blamed by smaller groups for not playing ball, and for betraying the larger cause — as we saw in the passage of the FATF-related bill. The rift over the FATF law reflects the larger divide in national politics. It shows that the PPP and PML-N are both willing to do what it takes to be accepted as bona fide contenders for the throne. There is also the question of how the smaller potential allies would be 'rewarded' in the current circumstances should the opposition succeed in dislodging the government. Many of these allies are

radicalised and openly shunned by the establishment after enjoying decades of patronage. This then is the strange opposition mix against the PTI. It is no surprise that fixing a common agenda for this multiparty crowd is proving to be quite an uphill task.

Serious allegations

IT is the kind of explosive story that media outlets in Pakistan's increasingly restrictive journalism landscape prefer to not touch, or at most, handle as gingerly as they would unexploded ordnance. A simultaneous tactic is to shoot the messenger. The sensational report published on Aug 27 on the Fact Focus website about the business empire that the family of retired Lt Gen Asim Saleem Bajwa, in sync with his rise in the military, had allegedly amassed in the US is an apt example.

Following a deafening silence on the claims made in the story, a vicious campaign was launched on one private TV channel and a couple of right-wing newspapers to discredit and malign the writer, Ahmed Noorani, as 'anti-state' and an 'enemy agent'. Predictably, that snowballed into death threats being hurled at him on social media. Incidentally, in 2017, Mr Noorani was waylaid and beaten in a near-fatal attack in Islamabad; no one was even arrested for the crime.

Mr Bajwa, who is also chairman CPEC Authority, has described the report as "malicious propaganda" and issued a four-page detailed rebuttal challenging each claim made in the story. Moreover, he tendered his resignation from his post as special adviser to the prime minister — a resignation that Imran Khan did not accept. The PTI's official Twitter account said Mr Khan was satisfied with the evidence provided by Mr Bajwa about his family's assets.

However, the controversy cannot be wished away so easily; indeed it has been fanned further by Mr Khan's response. Having beaten the drums of accountability so loudly where the political opposition is concerned, the government has opened itself up to unseemly mutterings about 'selective NROs'.

Mr Bajwa took the right decision by attempting to resign as SAPM, even though he did not choose to relinquish his charge as chairman CPEC Authority. Nevertheless, the gravity of the allegations against him is such that notwithstanding the prime minister's vote of confidence, the retired general needs to be more forthcoming in terms of documentation, particularly as he claims he can present the complete money trail.

A perception that he is shying away from accountability, like some politicians, would reflect negatively on him. Even if his assertion is correct that no wrongdoing is involved, he must for the sake of transparency, and to clear his name and that of his family, demonstrate willingness to cooperate with an FBR or NAB investigation.

Another abduction

IN a disturbing development, it has been reported that an SECP official has been abducted from the capital. The family of Sajid Gondal, a joint director at the SECP, and also a former journalist, said he has been missing since Thursday night. His relatives have lodged a complaint with the police and also approached the Islamabad High Court with a plea for his recovery. At the hearing of the petition, Justice Athar Minallah noted that the abduction of a citizen from the capital in this manner was "extremely alarming" and directed authorities to trace Mr Gondal by Monday.

The disappearance of Mr Gondal comes little more than a month after the brief abduction of journalist Matiullah Jan, who was forcefully taken in broad daylight by unidentified men as he waited outside a school in Islamabad. Despite the fact that Mr Jan's abduction was captured by a CCTV camera and elicited a deafening public outcry, the probe into who is behind the episode remains incomplete. The tragedy of our times is that these abductions are not uncommon. Rights activist Idrees Khattak, who was abducted last year in November, remains missing. More recently, activist Sarang Joyo, went missing and was later released by 'unknown persons' late at night. The pattern is eerily similar: citizens are picked up, their families run from pillar to post to seek help, yet there is no justice. Loved ones can at best hope that the 'missing person' will return, even if an explanation remains elusive. These events and the secrecy which shrouds them are an indictment of the law. While the Constitution says that no one is above the

law, it appears that some authorities are answerable to no one. It is not enough that Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari has condemned Mr Gondal's kidnapping. The prime minister in a recent interview was callously dismissive when he referred to Mr Jan's abduction. The government must fulfil its responsibility to protect citizens and provide an explanation for these disturbing episodes. Condemnations are not enough.

Rescuing Karachi

IT is a shame that it took at least 50 deaths, the destruction of scores of homes and the devastation of the city's already creaky water and sanitation system for the authorities to wake up to the fact that Karachi lacks even a rudimentary municipal infrastructure to sustain itself as the country's economic hub. Karachi's citizens may not have had to endure the effects of the recent rains had the authorities acted earlier to stem the rot. True, the unprecedented rains may well have shaken the administrations of even the most developed cities. But they would have been able to limit the damage. In Karachi's case, decades of neglect have compounded the tragedy. More than a week has passed since the torrential rainfall, yet several areas of the city — including upscale neighbourhoods — remain submerged in a mixture of rainwater and sewage, and without electricity.

This was the backdrop to Prime Minister Imran Khan's arrival in Karachi on Saturday. Armed with a Rs1.1tr package containing the contributions of both the centre and Sindh, his intent was to transform the city through providing water via the K-IV water project, rehabilitating those displaced in the ongoing anti-encroachment drive, and mending the city's drainage, waste disposal and public transport systems. This transformation plan will be executed through a provincial coordination implementation committee that has representation of the city's stakeholders and is headed by Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah.

The collapse of Karachi's infrastructure during the record-breaking monsoon spell has exposed the neglect at all levels of government — federal, provincial and local. For the better part of the past two years, the federal and provincial governments have been at daggers drawn over who gets to control the city. Promises have been made by both, but no meaningful work is visible. Development packages were also introduced by previous

governments, but they were largely ineffective due to shoddy implementation and toothless municipal bodies. In fact, this sprawling megapolis has been without a functioning local government system since the tenure of the last set-up expired on Aug 31. Has a watershed moment really been reached? The recent cloudburst acted as an equaliser of sorts; the rich and powerful — whose numbers include federal and provincial ministers — and the poor and voiceless were all affected. If even this calamity does not bring about a common resolve in those who govern to work together, despite their varying political opinions, Karachi would be a lost cause. For any consensus to last, the members of the federal and provincial cabinets will have to stop talking against each other in public and start talking to each other about ways to rebuild the country's economic backbone and give the residents of the city the civic services and peace that they have been craving for several decades now.

Kashmir at UN

THOUGH the world continues to recognise Kashmir as a disputed issue, India is using underhanded methods to get the question of the held valley struck off the UN Security Council's agenda. As reported in this paper on Saturday, India has asked the UN to remove the Kashmir issue so that it is not discussed during the upcoming General Assembly session, claiming it is an "outdated agenda item" and needs to be removed "permanently".

Furthermore, New Delhi claims its illegal annexation of the disputed territory last year has 'resolved' the dispute, something millions of Kashmiris patently disagree with. As Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN pointed out, a member state cannot change the agenda unilaterally; this can only be done through consensus.

As New Delhi has failed to counter the Kashmiri freedom struggle through brute force and repression, it is now applying subterfuge at the international level to obfuscate the Kashmir issue. The fact is that even after illegally subsuming the held valley within the Indian union last year, the world community continues to see Kashmir as a dispute between Pakistan and India. No amount of legal trickery internally or internationally by India will change this reality.

The government has done well to raise the Kashmir issue at all forums, and such efforts need to continue to counter India's efforts to remove this critical problem from the global agenda. Pakistan should continue to forge a consensus amongst Muslim states so that there is a unified voice on Kashmir. It would send a strong message if a high-level OIC meeting is held soon to discuss the issue and highlight the sufferings of the Kashmiri people, particularly after India's illegitimate annexation.

Other key states must also be taken on board so that efforts to remove Kashmir from the global discussion are frustrated. India feels that it can crush the Kashmiri desire for dignity and freedom. However, today many around the world — including independent human rights groups — are saying what Pakistan has been highlighting for decades: that India violates the fundamental rights of Kashmiri civilians with impunity.

The global debate on Kashmir must continue till there is a just solution — acceptable to the people of the held valley — to this over seven-decade-old problem. Pakistan must continue its moral and diplomatic support to the Kashmiris, while countering malicious attempts to have the Kashmir question removed from the international agenda.

Murder by another name

RARELY does a day go by without reading horrific reports of murders committed in the name of 'honour'. On Friday, while hearing a jail petition, Supreme Court Justice Qazi Faez Isa pointed out that the use of the word 'honour' should be dropped when referring to such cold-blooded killings. Justice Isa is correct. In conservative societies such as ours, attaching the notion of 'honour' to a crime is a way of justifying brutality, typically committed by the victim's own family members. Instead, an 'honour' killing should be called what it is: murder. Unfortunately, Pakistan has one of the highest incidences of 'honour' killings, and conviction rates remain low. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an estimated 1,000 murders take place across the country each year in the name of 'honour'. In Sindh alone, a police study found that 769 people were killed on the pretext of 'honour' between 2014 and 2019. The primary target is women and girls who are perceived to have strayed from social or tribal customs, and brought

‘shame’ upon their family, or at least this is the justification given in the courts.

Despite the passage of a landmark bill — which made life imprisonment mandatory for those who kill in the name of ‘honour’ — such blatant acts of violence continue. In August, a man shot his 19-year-old sister in Karachi. A few days after that, another man stabbed and killed his 16-year-old daughter and her friend in Sialkot. Earlier, in May, two young women were killed in North Waziristan after a private mobile phone video was leaked. While it is predominately women who are burdened with carrying notions of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ in their bodies, a number of men and boys have also been killed. In July, a woman and a man were killed in Mansehra under the same pretext. But, as noted by Justice Isa in his judgement, there is no ‘honour’ in murder.

Fight over Karachi

THE proverbial ink had barely dried on the Rs1.1tr Karachi Transformation Plan when cracks appeared between the centre and Sindh over the implementation of the agreement, particularly its financial details. Talking to the media on Sunday, federal minister Asad Umar criticised the PPP for publicly discussing the financial breakdown of the plan, a day after the prime minister had announced the ambitious scheme for Karachi while visiting the metropolis. Mr Umar was apparently not happy with a video clip of PPP chief Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari in which he had said the Sindh government would contribute Rs800bn to the KTP, with Islamabad covering the rest of the cost. Mr Umar claimed that in fact the centre would be picking up 62pc of the tab, while observing that “there should be no politics” over the KTP’s implementation.

Even the greatest optimist would admit that putting things right in this teeming metropolis is a gargantuan task. Apart from the logistical challenges of fixing Karachi’s water, sewerage and solid waste disposal problems — as the KTP envisages — getting the political stakeholders who claim to represent the city on the same page is easier said than done, given petty rivalries and at times competing agendas. Moreover, there is a wide gulf of mistrust between the PPP-run Sindh government, and the PTI-led centre; evidence of this was on display during Mr Umar’s presser in the city, as no

PPP representative participated. Indeed, the Sindh government has reason to believe the centre is seeking to establish a toehold in Karachi through the KTP. When Mr Umar says that the 18th Amendment is a “hurdle” to the city’s uplift, the PPP’s misgivings are strengthened. In fact, centralised control is not the way forward and the spirit of devolution must be respected.

Having said that, the Sindh government must also realise that its local government law has failed, and failed miserably. Ever since the SLGA 2013 became law, Karachi’s degeneration has picked up pace as the provincial government snapped up nearly all the powers of the local bodies, leaving the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation a largely toothless body. The PPP upholds the rights of the provinces when criticising the centre’s apparent attempts to roll back devolution, yet is not ready to give the third tier the rights the Constitution promises. Instead of wrangling over the details of the KTP, all stakeholders must work for the uplift of Karachi by putting political point-scoring aside. Meanwhile, ‘silver bullet’ solutions may only provide temporary relief, as the civic duties the plan focuses on are part of every modern city’s permanent governance structure. In the long term, only an elected, empowered local government system for Karachi and the rest of urban Sindh can succeed in bringing this forsaken metropolis out of the morass of hopelessness and neglect, and on to the path of progress.

Innovation blues

A FURTHER drop of three places in Pakistan’s ranking on the Global Innovation Index to 107 this year from 104 in 2019 speaks volumes for the country’s eroding ability and capacity to emerge as a modern, vibrant economy on the global map. It also reflects poorly on the quality of our institutions, human capital, infrastructure, markets, etc and generates little hope for the future of the nation’s struggling economy, which has been stuck in a rut for the last several decades. The new ranking shows that indicators such as the ease of getting credit and credit to the private sector as a percentage of GDP have worsened, infrastructure has deteriorated and the country’s ability to attract investment weakened. The major reason behind Pakistan’s poor performance on the GII is its unwillingness to invest in education, human capital, productivity, research and technology. Sadly, Pakistan finds itself far behind India which ranks 48 on the index in the

innovation rankings. Even other South Asian nations such as Nepal at 95 and Sri Lanka at 101 have fared better than us on the index. According to some, it is only a matter of time before Bangladesh, which at 116 has done worse regionally, will leave us behind, unless we begin investing heavily in our people. It is already leading on many other fronts. Another report, *Invisible Barriers to Trade — Pakistan 2020: Business Perspectives*, recently released by the International Trade Centre, also points to self-created regulatory barriers as a reason for our poor export performance.

According to the report, market frictions such as regulatory obstacles and lack of information transparency put up to \$7bn of untapped export potential at risk, especially for small businesses looking to trade more across borders, in spite of the disruptions caused by Covid-19. More than half the country's exporters struggle with domestic and foreign regulatory barriers, the report said. Indeed, Pakistan has immense potential to grow into a strong, educated and healthy economy. It only needs to correct its policy direction, and start to invest in education, health, research and innovation for long-term, sustainable growth. Yet this simple shift requires a big change in the vision of those who have been given the task of setting the government's spending priorities. Until now, the economy has survived on crutches provided by multilateral and bilateral lenders for geopolitical considerations. However, the situation is now changing. We should learn to stand on our own feet.

Former MPA's acquittal

THE acquittal of former MPA Majeed Khan Achakzai by a model court in Quetta in a case of manslaughter highlights what ails our justice system: if one has enough resources and influence, the chances of a favourable verdict are greater than in the case of a poor man accused of the same crime. The former MPA was released by the court for want of evidence in a hit-and-run accident that killed a traffic warden at Quetta's GPO Chowk in June 2017. A few days after the incident, CCTV footage of the accident surfaced on social media showing Mr Achakzai's vehicle, evidently driven by him, hitting the traffic warden. The video led to his arrest but he was released on bail by an anti-terrorism court six months later. The initial FIR registered against Mr Achakzai had included terrorism charges but those

sections were removed when he appealed for the case to be transferred to a local court. It is difficult to come to terms with the reasons — lack of evidence — given for his acquittal, especially after the footage of the accident went public. Moreover, Mr Achakzai had also come on television where he admitted to driving the vehicle at the time and talked of settling the matter according to tribal customs.

The decision to acquit the former legislator for want of evidence also raises doubts over the efficacy of the model courts that were set up by former chief justice Asif Saeed Khosa to expedite the process of justice. Indeed, it is true that cases tend to linger for years on end in this country, and the idea of model courts was to reduce this judicial burden and ensure quick justice for the litigants. But speed should not come at the cost of the quality of justice. Better prosecution, improved evidence gathering, witness protection, etc are needed if the ends of justice are to be served and the law applied equally to all.

FATF bills

THE government has decided to hold fresh sessions of the National Assembly and Senate on Sept 14 to get the Financial Action Task Force bills passed. The sessions were scheduled for Monday but were postponed for a later date because, as stated by Adviser on Parliamentary Affairs Babar Awan, many legislators were busy in relief works after the heavy spell of rains.

The adviser said the government would not allow any delay in the passage of these bills. A few days earlier he had said if the opposition obstructed the passage of the two FATF bills, the government would call a joint session of parliament in order to get them passed. The opposition had blocked these two bills in the Senate because it had certain reservations and wanted the government to clarify them.

Prime Minister Imran Khan used harsh words against the opposition for blocking these two bills. In a meeting of party spokespeople, the prime minister was reported to have said that the opposition and India were on the same page on FATF because India was trying to put Pakistan on the

blacklist. He said by blocking the passage of the bills, the opposition was trying to blackmail the government.

This was an unfortunate choice of words. There is no doubt that bills relating to the requirements of FATF are critically important and it is in the interest of Pakistan to legislate them, but the opposition is fully within its rights to raise questions about the provisions of these bills wherever required. This is what a parliamentary debate is meant for.

If the opposition feels that certain provisions of the bills could be misused for political purposes then the government must provide an explanation instead of hurling accusations. The rigid and confrontational attitude displayed by the government makes it difficult for parliamentarians to have a healthy discourse. It also creates unnecessary acrimony and makes the political atmosphere toxic. Questioning someone's patriotism is condemnable and no one should resort to such rhetoric for political one-upmanship.

The government should therefore utilise the upcoming sessions of the National Assembly and Senate to not only table the FATF bills but answer all questions and allay fears voiced by the opposition. If need be, the provisions under question can always be amended to build a consensus on the text of the bills.

All agree that the requirements of FATF should be met not only to avoid the blacklisting but also to strengthen our laws in order to curtail crimes such as terror funding that have financed violence in Pakistan. Good legislation should not be made controversial on political grounds. The government should dial down its inflammatory rhetoric and get down to the business of negotiating with the opposition on the floor of the two houses. The need of the hour is to make these laws with consensus.

Reopening schools

AFTER a six-month gap in in-person schooling, colleges and schools across the country are set to open their gates to students on Sept 15 — albeit in phases. The green light was given by Federal Education Minister Shafqat Mehmood after a meeting with the provincial education ministers; the

phased reopening plan which would see all students in class by the end of the month was discussed. Indeed, as the minister said, these have been difficult times, with pandemic-induced lockdowns throwing the academic year into disarray for millions of students and their teachers. At the press conference where this decision was announced, Mr Mehmood sat alongside Dr Faisal Sultan, special assistant to the prime minister on health, who expressed confidence in the testing capacity and appeared satisfied with the current rate of positivity in the country. Both stressed on the need to follow Covid-19 SOPs, with the minister saying action would be taken against institutes that violated them. For students returning to class after a long summer, there will be many changes to adjust to. The 'new normal' school experience will see fewer students per day, cancellations of some activities, distancing in classrooms, face-coverings, periodic Covid-19 screenings and frequent handwashing.

No doubt, the reopening of educational institutes is a welcome step. Schools are an essential component of communities and play a key role in the academic and social development of a child. While some teachers and students took schooling online during the lockdown to maintain the flow of the syllabus, there were scores of students who were unable to participate in virtual lessons due to poor internet facilities or lack of computers. School reopening will bring relief to many who have missed out, but increase the responsibility of both schools and the government as the threat from Covid-19 persists. Monitoring mechanisms should be developed and teaching staff must be supported if they take sick leave. Here, transparency, a proactive strategy and mass testing are crucial. Schools should chalk out a plan with the government and health departments in case of a Covid-19 outbreak in their locality, and not shy away from closure if the risks are high. Daily testing at between 20,000 and 30,000 is far too low. It must be ramped up dramatically to gauge community spread and formulate the next steps. Preventive behaviour ought to be encouraged and adopted, as it will not only allow schools to lower transmission rates but also help them to remain open.

In captivity

THE natural state of humankind has been described as "nasty, brutish and short", but this seems to be a more accurate description of the lives of many

animals in human captivity. A team of experts from Austria, recently tasked by the government to check up on the condition of animals at Islamabad's Marghazar Zoo, observed a further deterioration in standards since their earlier trip in 2016. They expressed their disappointment at the lack of cooperation from certain authorities, and the absence of progress in implementing their recommendations from their visit four years ago. In particular, the six-member team observed the behaviour and health of Kaavan — the zoo's lone elephant — to see if it was safe to relocate him, along with other animals, to a sanctuary, as ordered by the Supreme Court in May. Marghazar Zoo gained notoriety after Kaavan's plight made international headlines. In fact, a number of animals have met early deaths at the zoo. In 2018, a solitary bear reportedly died of a tumour inside its small enclosure. Soon after, a wild animal — most likely a wolf — made its way into one of the zoo's enclosures and mauled five deer to death. Then, between December 2018 and January 2019, eight nilgais were found dead inside their enclosure; medical reports later found that four had been poisoned, while the other four had died from the cold or injuries.

Most recently, two Marghazar Zoo lions died while they were being relocated to a sanctuary in Kasur, which led the Austrian team to deem the situation dangerous for all animals and humans involved. A disturbing video of the lions' handlers surfaced, showing them lighting fires inside the animals' enclosure. Of course, the issue is not about a single zoo, as the condition of many zoos in Pakistan is not up to the mark, and death and disease are frequently reported. Kaavan may soon be free, but many others remain trapped in lives that are indeed "nasty, brutish and short".

Organs & China link

ONLY sustained vigilance can counter a resurgence of the extreme form of exploitation that is the organ trade. The racket is predicated on poverty so extreme that individuals will sell their body parts in return for some monetary compensation, a 'choice' scarcely based on true free will. Consider that most vended organs are procured from bonded labourers, aptly described as 'modern slaves'. At the other end is the boundless greed of some medical professionals and affiliated individuals who keep the market for vended organs going, preying on the desperation of potential 'donors' as well as of

patients yearning for health. Recent events illustrate how the criminals involved in the lucrative business find ways to elude detection through cross-border networks. On Monday, an FIA team carried out a raid at the passport office in Lahore on receiving information about an international gang of organ traffickers operating in the city. Seven people, including donors and agents, were arrested — the latter on suspicion of luring destitute people to sell their organs, with the transplants being carried out in China. According to FIA sources quoted in this paper, preliminary investigations reveal that the agents paid some 30 donors Rs400,000 each, facilitated their transfer to China, and through their contacts in that country, arranged for transplant procedures to be performed there on patients travelling from Pakistan.

The latest development is part of a pattern that can be observed since 2017 after the FIA busted several organ trafficking rings in Punjab, the province where most of the racket was once based. Pakistan was at the time seeing a spike in ‘transplant tourism’, meaning that people were visiting this country especially to get transplants done with organs purchased on the black market. Several hospitals in Lahore and one in Rawalpindi were notorious for the practice; procedures were sometimes even carried out in residential buildings. Following the FIA’s crackdown, things went quiet, until law-enforcement agencies realised that the racketeers had altered their modus operandi. While donors were still being procured from Punjab, doctors — often practising in the same province — were now travelling to KP and AJK to carry out the transplants. After those gangs were apprehended, it seems the ‘theatre of operations’ has shifted further afield to China; earlier only some patients from Pakistan would go to that country, and to India, for transplant procedures.

This year marks a decade since Pakistan’s ethical organ transplantation law was enacted in March 2010. Prior to that, the country was infamous as a market for vended organs. Although illegal transplants declined steeply after the law was passed, every time there has been lax implementation the practice has seen a comeback. In an inequitable society, the exploitation of the poor knows no limits. Those guilty of trafficking in organs must be proceeded against to the fullest extent of the law.

Police changes

THE PTI government in Punjab has been on a never-ending crusade to find the best man to head the provincial police. It has only succeeded in confusing the public on who is responsible for their security and for how long. Counting the latest one appointed on Sept 8, the province has seen six inspectors general of police in two years — an average stint of less than five months per IGP. The larger picture also paints a bleak picture of frequent reshuffles in the bureaucracy. Earning the government uncharitable titles such as ‘unsure’ and ‘fickle’, these constant shake-ups cast serious doubt over the extent of control those in the driving seat can exercise. The outgoing IGP’s fall was quick and spectacular. Only a few months ago, he was hailed by Prime Minister Imran Khan himself as a saviour who would eliminate the criminals. This was a relief since many police chiefs had come and gone in quick succession and the impression was gaining ground that Lahore was not responding to the PTI’s security prescriptions.

Apparently, an intra-departmental tussle between him and Umar Sheikh, recently put in charge of the Lahore police, made it impossible for Shoaib Dastagir to continue as IGP. In what should be an ignominious reflection on any government, he “stopped working”, paving the way for Inam Ghani to be sent down by the bosses in Islamabad as the latest policing answer to Punjab’s growing security concerns. The new IGP begins on an inauspicious note, just as Mr Sheikh has caused concern by using the media to fight his war against departmental ‘discrimination’. Not too many are prepared to take this latest rearrangement at the top of Punjab Police lying down. The list of protesters includes PML-N politicians who have raised fresh fears of persecution under the new Lahore police chief. More importantly, an additional inspector general has refused to work under the new police chief in the province and many serving and former members of the force have expressed their disapproval of the move to appoint a new IGP to defuse the crisis after Mr Dastagir decided not to continue as head of Punjab Police. The clamour of protest in police ranks may die down in time and the anger may subside — in the long run all this fury is inconsequential. After all, replacements, lobbying and fighting to land a coveted post are a regular feature of public service.

New province demand

THE demand for new provinces to be carved out of the present federating units of the country is not a new one, and in the recent past there has been growing talk of creating a separate province in urban Sindh, with Karachi at its heart. The chief proponent of this idea has been the MQM-P which has — in one shape or another — raised this demand at various times during its existence. The latest iteration of this call came on Tuesday, when MQM-P convener Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui told a press conference in Karachi that the PPP had created “two Sindh” while already dividing the province on “ethnic and linguistic grounds”. The MQM has been piqued by the selection of administrators — terming them “non-locals” — in urban Sindh, particularly Karachi, after the local bodies’ tenure ended.

While there indeed exists a constitutional provision for creating new administrative units, the situation in Sindh — particularly the history of ethno-linguistic conflict in the province — means the idea of dividing Sindh is not a sound one. The PPP has opposed the idea tooth and nail, while Sindhi nationalist parties also will not stand for it. Moreover, the federal government’s recent intervention to address Karachi’s civic woes has strengthened the impression in some quarters that the centre is trying to wrest the metropolis away from Sindh. Instead of raising divisive demands for political gain, it would be better for the MQM and others who advocate for an ‘urban Sindh province’ to devote their energies to empowering the third tier through legislation. This should, in theory, give Sindh’s districts enough autonomy within the provincial structure to do away with complaints of over-centralisation and neglect that many in Karachi protest against. Over the past few decades, Karachi has seen far too much bloodshed on ethnic, sectarian and political lines, which is why any rhetoric that inflames such passions should be avoided. Instead, a democratic solution that embraces all of Sindh’s communities should be adopted to resolve the province’s governance issues.

ICJ’s scathing review

IT is not enough to say that a crime has been committed: to tackle it effectively perpetrators must be traced, investigated and successfully

prosecuted. On that score, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has proved to be an unmitigated failure.

In a briefing paper highly critical of its work, the International Commission of Jurists — a global body of 60 eminent judges and lawyers whose opinions command enormous respect — has recommended that the COIED's mandate not be renewed beyond Sept 14 when its tenure is due to expire. Titled Entrenching Impunity, Denying Redress, the document notes that the COIED has focused solely on determining the whereabouts of the missing, in which it has to some extent been successful. Of the 6,752 cases it has handled since March 2011 when it was established, 4,642 have been "disposed of"; 2,110 remain pending. However, the commission has neglected to fulfil its mandate to "fix responsibility on individuals or organisations responsible". In not a single case has anyone been held to account.

The ICJ has also pointed out that the definition of 'enforced disappearance' in the commission's regulations is inconsistent with the international definition and "misses several critical elements". As a result, it does not cover secret detentions, abductions by non-state actors having state support, etc. Many victims thus fall outside the COIED's purview.

The commission's "lack of structural independence", according to the ICJ, weakens it further. There is also the question of its credibility, considering its chairman — retired Justice Javed Iqbal — also serves as head of NAB, a full-time job in itself, and in that capacity has been involved in a number of controversies. One may recall that the Supreme Court in a recent judgement denounced NAB for its violation of fundamental rights and pursuit of a political vendetta. In short, much needs to change before victims and their families can find redressal.

Meanwhile, those who commit this despicable crime, one that is taken straight from the playbook of history's most despotic regimes, have been further emboldened. Enforced disappearances not just continue to take place here, they have reached a level of brazenness inconceivable a few years ago. Earlier, it was often in Balochistan — long a black hole for information — or remote parts of KP that individuals would be forcibly disappeared.

The theatre of action then slowly expanded to more populated areas. Now, victims are not necessarily snatched under cover of darkness; abductions even take place in broad daylight in busy urban centres. There may be multiple witnesses, yet no one seems able to trace the perpetrators, let alone prosecute them. Journalist Matiullah Jan was kidnapped in Islamabad on the morning of July 21; his ordeal ended 12 hours later when he was set free. Despite CCTV footage that clearly captured his abduction, no one has been apprehended. The 'known unknowns' remain free.

Death of miners

THE unfortunate deaths of more than 20 labourers in the Ziarat marble mines in Mohmand, KP, are yet another grim reminder of the perilous conditions that are part and parcel of the mining occupation in the country. The labourers died when large parts of the Ziarat marble mountain caved in on Monday, resulting in a massive rockslide that struck the workers in its path. According to the provincial labour minister, 34 miners had been present at the time of the accident. The bodies of 22 workers have been found while seven more were still missing at the time of writing. Earlier in February, at least nine workers perished and 14 were injured in a similar accident in Buner district when major portions of the marble mine in Bampokha village collapsed. On site were approximately 30 workers. Given the dangerous working conditions, resulting from outdated mining methods and the disregard for protective measures, such accidents and the ensuing loss of life are anything but surprising. This much was acknowledged by Federal Minister Fawad Chaudhry who lamented the "bitter" working condition of mine labourers. Meanwhile, the provincial labour minister acknowledged that modern mining methods needed to be implemented to ensure the safety of workers. He promised to carry out an investigation to ascertain the cause of the accident, saying that if anyone was found negligent they would be punished. One hopes that his words translate into action, and that the deaths don't just become another statistic.

After the accident in Buner, the local marble industry stakeholders had come to an agreement with the deputy commissioner on following SOPs during mining operations. Perhaps in this incident too, the provincial government can, besides paying compensation to the families of the dead workers, get

stakeholders in the local marble industry in Mohmand to agree to follow the relevant SOPs to make sure the workers are safe on the job. However, the issue of dangerous working conditions is not unique to the mining industry and persists in other sectors as well. Who can forget the gruesome deaths of over 260 workers burnt alive inside a garments factory in Karachi's Baldia area on this day in 2012? Criminal intent had been cited in that case but poor fire safety measures were also reported. In the case of the recent deaths, the Senate committee looking into the hazardous working conditions in coal mines can also take the marble mining industry under its purview.

Killing trans people

TWO aspects of the latest attack on transgender persons in Peshawar stand out: first, the frequency of these assaults, many of them fatal, in KP, and second, the unbridled, brandishing of weapons at ceremonies across the province that often lead to death and violence.

In this latest incident, gunmen killed one trans person and injured another. Apparently, the shooting took place just as a group of transgender performers was leaving a wedding venue after an evening's entertainment. Gul Panra was hit fatally. A wounded Chahat was taken to hospital, reports said. According to a social activist, no less than 69 trans people have been violently killed in KP since 2015.

The figure underscores the need for greater security than has been provided to these souls who cannot be expected to build safer abodes for themselves at a distance from civilisation. They have to share the same environment that has unfortunately been poisoned by a mindset that identifies certain groups as pariahs. There is an urgent need to arrest this alarming trend that encourages the targeting of trans people before the situation worsens.

Laws have been enacted over the last few years to ensure that trans persons have the same rights as other citizens. These legal steps have been accompanied by rules aimed, in theory at least, at giving more breathing space to a group that has been traditionally discriminated against. There have been campaigns in the media highlighting how the transgender community is as capable and active as anyone if it is given the same opportunities.

Perhaps there is some change, but by and large, the old attitudes persist. The complaints that those who attack trans people are not prosecuted and punished is seen by some as part of the larger picture of a rickety justice system that lacks proper trials. But the point to ponder here is that the marginalised of Pakistan including transgender complainants are even less likely to get a fair hearing than the 'more fortunate' have-nots of this land.

Blaming the victim

THE horrifying assault and gang rape of a woman driving on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway has shaken the citizens of this country to the core. The woman and her two children were on the M-11 Wednesday night when her car ran out of fuel and stalled. As she made frantic phone calls to get help, two men approached the family and forcibly took them to a nearby field at gunpoint.

The men raped the woman in the presence of her children, then proceeded to steal her cash and jewellery before making a getaway. As news of the heinous crime went viral, Lahore CCPO Umar Sheikh appeared before the media to offer nothing in the way of sympathy for the victim. Instead, he shared a list of ways on how she and other women could avoid being assaulted in the future. Shockingly, Mr Sheikh repeated his asinine remarks, which included telling women that they should be more responsible as assault is the ultimate fate of a woman travelling alone in our society.

It is appalling that Mr Sheikh's callous and prejudiced remarks should find support among senior members of the government. Accountability tsar Shahzad Akbar dismissed the criticism against Mr Sheikh as "unnecessary", while Planning Minister Asad Umar said his remarks though unsavoury did not amount to criminal conduct.

The episode has left women infuriated, and feeling let down and even more unsafe. It has also demonstrated that, despite a swelling women's rights movement in Pakistan, there are miles to go before women are treated as equals and human beings. Over the last couple of days, scores of women on social media have highlighted exactly how dangerous this victim-blaming mentality is. Many have shared their own stories of rape, assault and

harassment and admitted that it is the fear of judgement and shame that keeps them from speaking out or approaching the authorities.

The list of reasons why women in the country do not feel safe is distressingly long. Yet, senior officials and public office holders such as Mr Sheikh continue to perpetuate this vile notion that the victim is somehow responsible for the assault or that a woman should not venture out of her home without the protection of a man.

This attitude is unacceptable. It is not enough for individual members of the government to condemn the act and ignore the heartless and unprofessional conduct of the top official overseeing security in Lahore.

Furthermore, authorities should take note of the fact that the Pakistan National Highway and Motorway Police is unaware of who is responsible for policing the route where the assault took place, a fact which meant that the woman's call for assistance on the official helpline was denied. The government must remove Mr Sheikh if it wants to demonstrate to the women of this country that there is hope for their security.

Old power plants

THE government has rightly decided to discontinue 2,900 MW of generation from old, inefficient state-owned power companies. The plan will see the 1,400 MW capacity of four plants being phased out immediately followed by the shutdown of another 1,500 MW by 2022. The government has also decided to end the must-run status of the three RLNG-based plants in Punjab with a combined capacity of 3,900 MW. The existing agreements with these plants force the government to use them even though the induction of cheaper coal- and hydro-based generation and the reduction in electricity demand have pushed them to a lower position in the economic dispatch merit order. The addition of nuclear-, hydro-, renewable- and coal-based capacity going forward is expected to further drive these plants down the merit order.

The decision has apparently been made to slash the overall generation cost, which has driven up power tariffs to one of the highest in the region and made electricity unaffordable for industrial, commercial and domestic

consumers over time. Further, the inability of the authorities to cut distribution losses, recover bills and check theft has posed a new quasi-fiscal challenge in the form of circular debt of more than Rs2.1tr in the power sector. The government is striving to find a solution to the issues though. Recently, it struck a deal with private power producers to reduce their profits. But not many believe that these piecemeal, short-term measures will help liquidate the power-sector debt or address the issue of affordability without deeper reforms in the power sector. Sadly, the country's energy policymakers haven't proved equal to the task. Take the example of the NTDC's electricity-generation expansion plan for the next 27 years. A review of the project by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis shows that the authors of the plan are completely unaware of ongoing developments in renewables and how these are expected to change the global electricity-generation scene by the time Pakistan turns 100. Instead, it proposes, even if innocently, to lock Pakistan into dirty and expensive generation capacity and saddle the government and consumers with a greater financial burden. What we need is a long-term capacity expansion plan that takes into account ongoing technological advancements in cheaper renewable energy sources to make electricity affordable for consumers. Equally important is the development of a competitive electricity market in the country with the government only playing the role of effective regulator.

Another building collapse

IN the third such incident of the year, Karachi witnessed another multistorey building collapse, this time in Korangi. Four people died while at least six were treated in hospital. Earlier in June, a five-storey building collapsed in the Lyari area claiming at least 22 lives. Similarly, at least 27 people died in March when another incident occurred in the city's Gulbahar area. According to the Sindh Building Control Authority, the multistorey residential building was illegal and had been constructed on a plot carved out of an amenity plot, a practice known as china cutting. Though the building was built only four years ago, the recent rains had apparently weakened its foundations when water accumulated in the basement. However, when no lessons are learned, it becomes pointless to ask why the building authorities allowed the illegal allotment and selling of the land and the construction of a building on it in

the first place. Numerous such structures exist and a large number of neighbourhoods in the city have been built on amenity plots. With poor-quality construction and frequent violation of building regulations, it is no surprise when such tragedies befall residents living in these death traps.

It is not enough to merely state that such construction is illegal and order an inquiry when buildings collapse. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court too took notice of the poor performance of the SBCA and ordered the Sindh government to overhaul the agency. But it is not the SBCA alone which can tackle the mammoth task of tidying up the numerous unregulated housing societies and structures in a city of 20m. Successive governments have neglected the city's needs and failed to pay any attention to the grave housing crisis that is now imploding with the mushrooming of illegal structures. To prevent further tragedies of this kind, the authorities must set up an independent oversight body, as per the SBCA Ordinance, that monitors illegal structures and the quality of construction in buildings across the city.

Gender-based violence

THE message to women is clear: silence is your best option. In public, in the 'sanctity' of the home, wherever you face gender-based violence, silence is the best option.

The gang rape of a young woman on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway has once again underscored why it is so difficult to contain the scourge of sexual violence in Pakistan. Despite the public outpouring of sympathy for the victim, who along with her children has endured an ordeal she may never be able to put behind her, the fact is that a deep vein of misogyny runs within this society.

Read: Pakistanis take to the streets to demand justice and structural reform after motorway gang-rape

The Lahore CCPO Umer Sheikh's reprehensible victim-blaming springs from this very mindset. When the city's top cop says in so many words that women who step outside their homes after a certain hour cannot expect to be protected from predatory men, he does more than disgrace his office. His

casual sexism reinforces a patriarchal order premised on controlling women, not just in the public sphere but in the domestic one as well. Moreover, Mr Sheikh also let slip identifying details about the rape survivor, flouting the most basic protocols about the handling of sexual violence cases.

This is precisely why only a small minority of women take the 'risk' of reporting crimes like rape or domestic violence. Most would balk at the prospect of being quizzed by boorish, insensitive cops who are the product of a society where moral policing of women is almost a national pastime. Suggestions that they somehow 'asked for it' — classic victim-blaming in which the onus is on the woman to prove why she shouldn't have expected violence to be visited on her — compounds their suffering. The fight to bring the perpetrators of gender-based violence to book is often thus lost at the very first hurdle.

Some urgent measures are called for. Gender sensitisation should be an integral part of police training, rather than constituting the occasional workshop. Moreover, personnel who are incapable of reflecting on their prejudices and modifying their behaviour accordingly must be held accountable; misogyny is a badge of shame, and no police officer should be made to forget it.

The process of evidence gathering, including medical examination and obtaining the victim's statement, must be geared towards avoiding further trauma. In a positive development, the humiliating and discredited 'two-finger' virginity test — upon which are based often demeaning conclusions about rape victims' character that are then used against them in court — may finally be abolished in Pakistan.

Finally, the police in this country needs to stop resembling a boy's club. The recruitment of women in law enforcement must be further stepped up and more of them promoted to senior positions. Victims of gender-based violence should have access to female police officers especially trained to handle this type of crime. Pakistani women deserve to feel safe in their country.

Wildlife perils

ACCORDING to the Living Planet Index, the global population of animals, birds and fish has decreased by over two-thirds in less than five decades; a startling reminder of the dangers of human excess and myopia. As we witness the catastrophic effects of climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and the spread of zoonotic diseases, it is time to pause and reflect on the contemporary world's relationship with the natural world, including its indifference to the plight of other sentient beings. Apathy and egoism has cost us heavily, and will continue to do so, until better sense prevails. The past few decades have strengthened a single ideological and economic system, but its 'progress' has come at the expense of the environment and natural resources, and it has increased disparity. Rapid urbanisation, rampant consumerism, agricultural expansion, deforestation, and unthinking, unchecked greed have led to the present situation, and we now have to live with its discontents. If sincere efforts are not made to reverse the self-destructive trajectory we are on, we risk leaving behind an uninhabitable world for future generations.

We know that the planet and all species within it are interconnected, and yet the short-sightedness of some has robbed many of a better future. High-profile meetings are held, international accords are signed, and tall promises are made — but then what? The natural habitats of animals continue to be encroached upon, entire forests are decimated, oceans are choked, and the air is made unbreathable. The Living Planet Report goes on to mention that 40pc of the world's oceans have been "degraded"; while 75pc of the total fish stocks are "overexploited". Another recent study by the UK's National Oceanography Centre found there was 10 times more plastic in the Atlantic Ocean than estimated before. This is not entirely surprising, given that 8m metric tons of plastic waste is dumped into the ocean each year, and eventually makes its way into the human food supply. Or it suffocates and kills marine life. The previous year saw an alarming number of whales wash ashore on beaches across the world; their digestive systems bloated with plastic. This included a juvenile sperm whale with 100kg of plastic, rope and netting in his stomach in Scotland. With the Covid-19 pandemic raging in many parts of the world, there is a surge in demand for personal protective equipment, which only adds to the plastic pollution.

Media in the line of fire

IN an incident that has become an all-too-familiar tale, Express Tribune journalist Bilal Farooqui was picked up and detained by police on Friday. A case was registered against him under Sections 500 and 505 of the Pakistan Penal Code and Sections 11 and 20 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act by a factory worker who alleged that Mr Farooqui had posted “objectionable material” about the country’s armed forces on social media. On the same day, a sedition FIR was registered against journalist and ex-Pemra chief Absar Alam by a lawyer who accused him of using derogatory language against state institutions and personalities. Though Mr Farooqui was released and the PPC sections removed, his and Mr Absar’s case follow several incidents in which journalists have been threatened, abducted or silenced.

Contrary to the impression of a ‘free media’ the prime minister gave in a recent interview to an international media outlet, journalists in Pakistan are living under constant threat. They are watched, followed, intimidated and — if they don’t comply with the ‘requests’ of the state — they are abducted or arrested. The message is loud and clear: Big Brother is watching, and those who post criticism against certain institutions will be punished. From the head of a media group to a blogger, no one feels safe. The climate of fear that journalists live in is suffocating. It is an indictment of democratic values that support the freedom of an individual to express opinions without fear of retaliation, censorship or legal action. This environment has led to an unprecedented wave of censorship and self-censorship, as journalists and media houses can see the writing on the wall. The government must acknowledge that this is a reality instead of dismissing abductions and threats to journalists as non-issues. It must not be a party to this gross abuse of power and thuggery. International forums such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have time and again highlighted the routine harassment and intimidation of journalists in Pakistan. The world will not be fooled.

Bahraini recognition

AFTER the UAE became the third Arab state in decades to recognise Israel last month, it had been predicted that this would create a domino effect, with other Arab and Muslim states following suit. Sure enough, Bahrain joined this growing cluster of states on Friday, while other Arab/Muslim countries may be waiting in the wings for an opportune moment to publicly announce their embrace of the Zionist state. Like the UAE move, President Donald Trump gleefully announced the ‘breakthrough’ on Twitter, heaping accolades on his “GREAT friends” Israel and Bahrain. Indeed, out of all the Arab states, the Gulf sheikhdoms are prime contenders where the recognition of Israel is concerned, with or without the resolution of the Palestine question. The Gulf Arabs are under the American security umbrella with many — including Bahrain — hosting major military bases, while several among them are also on poor terms with Iran. Therefore, there is little surprise that these states are willing to accept Israel, with the US offering friendly ‘advice’ on the benefits of doing so.

The Palestinians, expectedly, are not so happy about the move, with the PLO describing the Bahraini decision as a “betrayal of the Palestinian cause”, while Hamas has called for the “virus of normalisation” to be resisted. And while their rulers are describing the decision in glowing terms, many Bahrainis have expressed their dismay on social media with Manama’s move. Indeed, any consensus on the Palestine question within the Arab/Muslim world is very quickly dissolving. At a recent online Arab League meeting, foreign ministers of the bloc were not able to come up with a resolution condemning last month’s normalisation of ties between Israel and the UAE. This indicates that some powerful players in the League clearly feel uneasy about condemning the deal, and thereby upsetting the US.

The aforementioned developments indicate the existence of two very distinct camps in the Muslim world; the pro-American camp, which includes the Gulf Arabs, has no qualms about jettisoning the Palestinians’ legitimate demands and getting on the next plane to Tel Aviv. The other camp, which includes Iran and Turkey, is very vocal about the Palestinian issue and has condemned those rushing towards normalisation. In such a situation, the OIC or a similar forum of Muslim states needs to debate the issue

thoroughly. The Palestinians and their supporters must be given such a forum to express their reservations about normalisation without a just resolution to the Arab-Israeli dispute. The UAE and Bahrain should also be allowed to express their justifications for establishing relations with Israel. Making peace with Israel is not impossible, as long as the Palestinians are satisfied that their national and human rights will be guaranteed in any peace deal. Moreover, external powers should not be allowed to use diverging views on the Israel issue within the Muslim world to isolate certain states, such as Iran.

Afghan peace talks

AFTER much uncertainty and delays, the Afghan peace talks have finally got off to a start in Doha, Qatar. The Afghan government delegation is led by Masoom Stanekzai while the Afghan Taliban team is headed by Shaikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani. Those in attendance at the talks also include American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, chief of the High Afghan Council for National Reconciliation Dr Abdullah Abdullah as well as Afghan Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar. Prime Minister Imran Khan has welcomed the intra-Afghan dialogue saying Pakistan has fulfilled its commitment and now Afghans should work towards a durable peace through a negotiated settlement of the dispute. The talks kicked off on Saturday with a long line of dignitaries from various countries welcoming the delegates and wishing them well. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi also addressed the gathering through video link and called for an end to violence while saying Pakistan would back the consensus that emerged from the talks. The talks faced delays on the release of some Taliban prisoners but as a result of sustained pressure from all stakeholders, the Afghan government finally relented and allowed the detainees to walk free.

After decades of incessant hostilities and war, Afghanistan is at a historic moment that can herald the long-awaited peace. These talks represent the best chance for a settlement between factions that have fought each other with the support of external players. It is also an opportunity for the United States to bring to an end its longest running war that has led to the death of thousands of people and the near destruction of Afghanistan. Pakistan has

played a very positive and constructive role in facilitating these talks and this role has been duly acknowledged by the United States, United Kingdom and other stakeholders. However the crucial stage has begun only now. There is much that could go wrong. The dangers of violence breaking out yet again remains alive. One incident could derail these negotiations. It is therefore important for all stakeholders, including Pakistan, to remain deeply engaged in these intra-Afghan negotiations to ensure that talks cross over any hurdles that may come up, and lead to a consensus that can see a power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan. If peace can return to the war-ravaged country it would enable the people of Afghanistan to start rebuilding their lives and future. This benefits everyone, including Pakistan.

Sugar inquiry

WITH the court cases challenging the formation of the sugar inquiry commission and the report it had produced out of its way for now, the National Accountability Bureau has initiated its investigation into the shortages of the sweetener last winter that saw its domestic prices shoot through the roof. The NAB probe is one of multiple inquiries Prime Minister Imran Khan had sanctioned in June against sugar mill owners on the basis of the comprehensive findings of a forensic audit report prepared by the commission. That was an unprecedented move because the government had decided to investigate an entire industrial sector that had been operating as a cartel for decades. The report had brought to light the various systemic issues in the industry, underscoring the fact that the powerful mill owners had for years cheated poor farmers, evaded taxes, secured massive government subsidies and committed corporate fraud. And yet, they got away with these crimes because of their clout over political parties and successive governments. Thus, it was but natural that the mill owners moved the courts to stop the government from conducting investigations that could lead to their incrimination.

Politicians of all hue have a stake in the sugar business and operate collectively to get massive financial favours from the government at the expense of hapless taxpayers and consumers. It is for the first time in the country's history that a government has taken on this powerful mafia and initiated multiple probes into different types of frauds committed by the

industry. Given the reputation of NAB, many suspect that its inquiry against the sugar mills could turn into a witch-hunt of certain politicians belonging to the opposition parties or those who have fallen out with the ruling party's leadership. It is therefore important for the anti-graft agency to ensure that no one gets away or gets punished because of political affiliations. That will not only further damage NAB's image but could also hurt efforts to bring to book those who have looted the national exchequer and consumers.

Power at grassroots

SINDH Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has added another twist to the never-ending local government saga in the country. Mr Shah has conditioned the holding of LG elections in the province on the delimitation of constituencies, which in turn is linked to a population headcount whose results enjoy consensus. These assertions would well-nigh be impossible to oppose, just as it is extremely difficult for many in the country to accept the results of the census of 2017. The issue of the census results should be debated and settled by the political parties and the ECP so that new demarcations can be carried out soon and the provincial government can hold elections within 120 days of the completion of the delimitation exercise. Without the fulfilment of these formalities, Sindh cannot be legally forced to hold LG polls even if these are considered essential to democratic growth and people's empowerment. True, there are vested-interest groups all over Pakistan; these groups persist with their denial of this form of popular rule at the grassroots, and comprise, for the most part, a province's ruling party that is loath to share any vestige of power with the lower tier of government.

Mr Shah has just managed to rid himself of a Karachi mayor that the Sindh dispensation couldn't quite fire. He was fortunate that he did not have to face an antagonistic local-level government in those parts of the province where his party had won the general election. In Punjab, the unfortunate government felt that it had no option but to dissolve the LGs because the latter were dominated by its rivals. The sad aspect was that while so much muck flew to and fro, the winding up of the LGs generated very little by way of protest. It was a *fait accompli*. This is how it always happens in the country when it comes to the question of empowerment.

The provincial units are looking for ways and means to ensure that a further downward transfer would not hurt them. Those reluctant to share power could mean a class of politicians, or a party, or an individual or the family that the party is all about. Chief Minister Shah may be working to protect the interests of all of them since these elements appear to come together under the PPP's umbrella at the moment. A more people-oriented political trajectory could perhaps have put the party on the road to acknowledging, without reservations, the need to hold LG polls, instead of trying to find loopholes. The process appears to be endless; how long will it take for those in power to work out a formula to share power with the local authorities? A deadline must be set. Local impatience may be growing amid a global trend to have smaller units for better management.

Overbilling consumers

THE debate on Pakistan's power sector has mostly focused on the macro-fiscal issues plaguing it: electricity shortages, circular debt, and expensive power purchase agreements with private producers. These are often cited as factors responsible for making electricity unaffordable. Structural issues at the retail electricity distribution stage such as exorbitant transmission and distribution losses, power theft, unrecovered bills, corruption, and bad management seldom find space in the overall power-sector reform discourse. Nor is the chronic issue of overbilling by distribution companies (including the privatised K-Electric) to cover up their losses and inefficiencies, and inflate their revenues, considered a serious matter. The practice continues despite widespread complaints of inflated billing by consumers. Even repeated warnings by the power regulator Nepra have failed to convince distribution companies to end this practice. Past attempts to instal smart meters to resolve the issue of overbilling have been resisted by the distribution companies. A smart-meter project funded by the ADB in Lahore and Islamabad had to be discontinued two years ago, and has only recently been revived.

In its State of Industry Report 2019, Nepra has once again highlighted the issue of overbilling. Expressing its concerns over the pathetic performance of Discos, it says: "The overbilling issue ... still haunts the consumers of electricity. Discos are still involved in systematic manipulation of the

electricity units to manage their distribution losses which are factually higher.” It further points out the inability of the retail electricity sellers to cut their transmission and dispatch losses, which is one of the main reasons for overcharging consumers. Another reason for overbilling is the inability of the distribution firms to fully recover their bills. Instead of improving their recovery ratios, Discos have been allowed to resort to revenue-based blackouts in high-loss areas. This practice has, in turn, proved a disincentive for them to improve bill recoveries. Besides, it has stifled sales growth and increased electricity prices. It is believed that the practice of overbilling is in the knowledge of the management of the Discos. Macro-fiscal issues afflicting the power sector need to be tackled to prevent its total collapse. But these are more like the symptoms of a deep-rooted disease, which cannot be cured without treating the causes — retail-level structural problems that are eating their way through to the top of the power sector. No reforms will succeed without fixing distribution companies and ensuring competition at the retail level.

Communal peace

OVER the past several weeks, the situation vis-à-vis sectarian peace in Pakistan has been extremely fragile. Reportedly, due to some controversial remarks made from the pulpit during Muharram, and the resulting reaction from clerics, significant polarisation has been witnessed in society.

Perhaps the most worrying manifestation of this was witnessed last week in Karachi, when three rallies were taken out by religious groups in honour of the companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Particularly massive was Friday’s rally — organised by followers of the Deobandi school — and Saturday’s event, sponsored by Barelvi clerics. A relatively smaller event was held on Sunday by the Ahle Hadith school of thought.

While it is everyone’s democratic right to protest peacefully, the presence of banned hate groups in the rallies, as well as the raising of takfiri slogans in at least one rally, does not bode well for communal peace.

This newspaper has long argued that there can be no justification for hate speech from the pulpit targeting any sect, religion or their revered personalities. From the 1980s onwards, Pakistan has seen horrific bouts of

sectarian violence, and the misuse of the microphone by clerics has played a central role in stirring up sectarian zeal.

In the current age, with news and rumours reaching countries within minutes thanks to social media, the situation is even more delicate. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the state and ulema to play their roles to prevent sectarian hatred from spreading. The government must ensure that pulpits are not misused to demonise any community and propagate sectarian views, and that action is taken against violators as per the law.

Clerics, on the other hand, have an equally important job; instead of working up their flock into a frenzy, ulema of all sects must cooperate to create an atmosphere of harmony. If controversial remarks are reported on social media or elsewhere, ulema and community leaders must work to defuse the situation. Pakistan cannot afford to be caught in the maelstrom of communal hatred.

Public hanging is no remedy

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan must not allow himself to be swept along on the emotions of an enraged public. Even while acknowledging that the motorway gang rape last week has understandably touched a raw nerve, he should advocate systemic change to tackle such crimes, a much more productive course of action rather than adding to the lynch mob atmosphere.

Yet during a television interview on Monday, Mr Khan called for publicly hanging those who sexually abuse women and children, although he did follow it up with the caveat that such punishment was not “internationally acceptable” and could cost Pakistan its GSP-Plus trade status. As the leader of a country that not long ago witnessed the horror of public executions carried out by bloodthirsty militants, he should be doubly aware of the optics of advocating such punishment, even if only in cases of rape.

Public hangings are neither an immediate nor a long-term answer to any crime (this paper on principle opposes the death penalty in any form), a fact that most criminologists worth their salt would confirm. Such a spectacle would only serve to include us among the most brutalised of societies, where the desire for vengeance outweighs the desire for justice.

Even the prime minister's proposal that sex offenders be chemically castrated ignores the very relevant fact that the conviction rate in rape cases, which are already grossly under-reported, is a measly 3pc. Why is this so? Because police investigations are defective and blatantly compromised and the justice system has little interest in seeing justice done.

Read: The motorway rape case has exposed once again the failure of our law-enforcement and legal systems

Going by the most recent developments, and assuming that the police have zeroed in on the right suspects, it is clear that when their feet are held to the fire, law-enforcement agencies can perform the way they are supposed to. Had they done so earlier in the case of one of the suspects, described as a 'habitual rapist', he may not have been free to commit his latest alleged rape and several women would have been spared the ordeal they were put through.

According to law enforcement, this individual was also involved in a gang rape case in 2013 but, outrageously enough, was released from custody after compromise between the two parties. Under the law, rape is a non-compoundable offence. The example of many countries lies before us: it is the certainty of punishment, not its severity that acts as a deterrent to crime.

Meanwhile, what can better illustrate the extent of the rot in Pakistan's law enforcement that the Lahore High Court chief justice has warned the CCPO Lahore against extrajudicial killing of the suspects in the motorway gang rape case? The attorney general on Monday made some eminently sensible observations about our flawed and inequitable criminal justice system. Only structural and procedural changes can make it one that actually serves the people.

Back to school

YESTERDAY, after a six-month hiatus, many schools, colleges and universities across the country opened their doors to cautiously welcome a new term. This was in compliance with the government's decision to reopen educational institutions in phases across the country, beginning with higher education institutions, vocational training centres, and classes 9 to 12. Next

week, classes 6 to 8 will resume; while primary schools will reopen a week after that. It is true that Pakistan has had relatively fewer cases of the novel coronavirus compared to other countries, and some of the initial fears surrounding the virus have dissipated. But the threat remains intact, and there can be a resurgence of Covid-19 cases if care is not taken. As the classes resumed, Sindh reported over 340 new cases of the virus, and three deaths. Meanwhile, Punjab reported 57 new Covid-19 cases and three fatalities in the span of 24 hours. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Faisal Sultan tweeted a reminder to parents, teachers, school administrators and students to practise three steps in order to curtail the threat: “[m]asks, reduced density in classes, [and] hand hygiene”. Earlier, at a press conference, Dr Sultan had recommended that the number of students in a classroom be reduced, and that lessons be taught in shifts, so that social distancing could be maintained. It is absolutely vital that all SOPs are followed to the tee, including avoiding crowds, regularly disinfecting surfaces, not sharing belongings, taking handwashing breaks, and ensuring thermal gun screenings at entrance points. If possible, some classes could be conducted outdoors.

While it may be a challenge to enforce the SOPs, the provincial governments must ensure compliance at both state and private levels, and teachers and administrators must remain vigilant. But while children have suffered and missed out on their education — lack of internet access and poor connectivity being major constraints — virus symptoms are mainly seen in older age groups, and it is the teachers and staff that are perhaps at greater risk. The All Pakistan Private Schools Federation has already voiced its concerns, citing the financial burden of ensuring all SOPs are followed. And one college and hostel in Islamabad was sealed after 16 Covid-19 cases were reported on the first day back; in Toba Tek Singh, seven government school teachers tested positive for the virus. However, if a resurgence in cases is recorded, then the government will need to reconsider or modify its position.

Industrial ambitions

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan’s declaration of Pakistan entering a new industrialisation phase has to be tempered with reality. There’s no doubt that

the opportunities are enormous as he pointed out while inaugurating the Rashakai Economic Zone, one of the four priority SEZs being developed under the CPEC initiative. Yet there's a lot of spadework that still has to be done before the fruits of the venture can mature. Pakistan has pinned too many hopes on SEZs. For example, the government is expecting massive Chinese investments in these zones. Global experience shows that SEZs, geographically defined and delimited industrial areas, are an important vehicle for wooing investments by offering investors attractive fiscal and policy incentives to boost exports and encourage transfer of technology. But the experience of various countries also shows that the development of industrial estates and incentives are never enough to attract investors — foreign or domestic. That is true for Pakistan as well.

In spite of implementing an extensive legal framework through the SEZ Act of 2012 and later amending it in 2016 to make it more attractive for investors, the government is struggling to get the desired results. The main reason is its failure to 'insulate' potential investors from the jurisdiction of the country's state institutions and laws to give them a sense of security. That means that potential investors will enjoy certain incentives and a few other facilities their counterparts operating outside the zones don't have, but would continue to face an otherwise regressive business environment. If the government wants the SEZs to work and bring in FDI, especially in the case of Chinese firms looking to relocate outside their country, it will have to convert these SEZs into 'industrial islands' with transparent, strict and independent rules of business for facilitating and regulating investors. Without protecting investors from the overall, business-unfriendly environment and the reach of state agencies, it will be difficult to attract investment, especially FDI.

Unfair justice

IN remarks that mirror reality, the attorney general of Pakistan, Khalid Jawed Khan, acknowledged that our criminal justice system favours the perpetrators of the crime rather than the victims. Speaking at a ceremony to mark the start of the judicial year at the Supreme Court, the AG rightly said that injustice is at its worst if the perpetrator is socially or financially powerful. He also spoke about the deep flaws in the investigation and prosecution processes that allowed criminals to get away with their crimes. In civil

matters, he said, cases linger on for generations and in -white-collar crimes perpetrators pass themselves off as victims due to a faulty accountability mechanism. The AG also regretted that women usually bear the brunt of the injustice prevalent in our system.

It is refreshing to hear the AG admit these fundamental and structural flaws within our system. It is unusual for state functionaries to admit how broken our criminal justice system is. It is either a lack of understanding, or of acceptance of this reality, that often leads people to cite harsh punishments as a panacea for crimes. Very few among our public office holders display the courage to accept that unless the criminal justice system is reformed, no amount of harsh punishment will curb crime. In the case of the motorway rape incident, we are witnessing similar superficial remedies being offered by parliamentarians and state functionaries at large. These people prefer the shortcut — and one that is ineffective — of public hangings than the tedious reform process of fixing our policing, investigations, prosecution and transparent litigation that provides justice that is timely and affordable. These are difficult tasks but there is no way around them. Any government that wants to fix this broken system will need to delve deep into these matters and repair damaged institutions with consistent and sincere efforts. However for this to happen, the governments of the day will need to depoliticise policing. It is unfortunate that no government in Pakistan, including the present federal and provincial ones, is willing to take this step. If the root cause is not addressed, not much can be achieved except superficial measures that cater more to optics than substance.

The AG has said the right things. He now needs to push for action on them. He commands influence within the system and therefore his words, while welcome, should be the first step in a process to reform the criminal justice system. The judiciary plays a critical role and it too has a responsibility to reform its own house that continues to be burdened with delays and many other ailments. Without such reforms Pakistan will continue to stumble from crisis to crisis without realising that firefighting is the wrong strategy to address deep-rooted weaknesses. The challenge has never been clearer.

Unreasonable bill

THE right to freedom of speech as stipulated in Article 19 of the Constitution is subject to “reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of ... the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan”, etc. In practice however, the list of topics out of bounds for the ordinary mortals living in this country is a long one, and they ignore it at their peril. The concept of ‘national security’ is being applied so broadly as to even preclude fair comment — indeed, to extend blanket immunity to certain personalities themselves. That is a specious use of the term. Not content with this, some representatives of the people have decided to go further and give these unreasonable restrictions the force of law. On Tuesday, a private member’s bill was tabled in the National Assembly proposing amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code whereby anyone who “intentionally ridicules, brings into disrepute or defames the armed forces of Pakistan or a member thereof” will be liable to “imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years or with a fine up to Rs500,000 or both”.

There is in this country no dearth of admiration for our armed forces. It is manifested when they assist civilian administrations in rescuing victims of earthquakes and floods; when their helicopters pluck stranded climbers from frozen mountainsides; and, most of all, when soldiers are martyred while defending Pakistan. No one would ridicule or defame them when they acquit themselves honourably in their duty to safeguard the nation’s territorial integrity. It is only when they stray from that path into the dirty world of politics and business that they render their institution controversial. Governance and policymaking is not their domain. In the past, some chiefs of army staff such as Gen Jehangir Karamat tried to keep the military within its constitutional bounds, and saw the institution’s reputation enhanced for it. Gen Qamar Bajwa would also earn plaudits were he to distance the army from civilian affairs. This country has lived through multiple military dictatorships; and senior security forces personnel, retired and otherwise, run vast corporate concerns. Parliament must not place these areas beyond the scope of fair comment, which is made in the public interest and thereby constitutes a defence against a charge of defamation. Surely the military itself would rather not be seen as so intolerant of constructive criticism.

Comeback formula

THE choice is before former prime minister Mian Nawaz Sharif. He can continue to take refuge in the advice of his London-based medical consultant or return home to face the legal charges against him. The Islamabad High Court has provided a reason for his return by issuing a non-bailable warrant for his arrest on Tuesday. A greater cause may be waiting for him in the echelons of power in Pakistan — over and above the protective shield his lieutenants have tried to build around him against any attempt to forcibly bring him back. What was medical leave then has since turned into self-exile, and any attempt at absconding in the eye of the law will also be seen as wilful absence from his political task. Those who want Mr Sharif back legally wonder why he isn't in a hospital undergoing examination and treatment. This might sound cruel to some but then politics is not for the faint-hearted or those who become addicted to the luxuries that often accompany success in the profession. A battery of PML-N leaders may go on pressing for their leader's right to avail the best treatment abroad — but this will be at the risk of losing crucial space during an uncertain phase.

The mystery regarding Mr Sharif's health condition appears to be having a debilitating effect on the personality that was in the making after his removal from power. The image is in contrast to his vows of resistance after he quit under a court decree in July 2017. There are no two ways about it. Either he can resume the refrain that he is being targeted as part of a selective accountability drive or he can choose a life on the sidelines, passing on the mantle of leadership to someone he deems capable. Or his sympathisers can continue to project how an under-duress, ailing man is being treated by a 'vengeful' system. It is an old formula that some may see as his best option

Economic prospects

THE Asian Development Bank says Pakistan's economy is moving out of the coronavirus-induced sluggishness and beginning to crawl forward. A new report released by the Manila-based bank on Tuesday forecast a modest but broad-based recovery, projecting the economy's expansion by 2pc in the present fiscal year. This is in line with the government's GDP target of 2.1pc and a significant improvement over the negative growth of

0.4pc last year. Indeed, short-term economic trends show that the economy is returning to the path of recovery. Yet the ADB forecast in the Asian Development Outlook Update report should not be taken as gospel because it assumes that the impact of the Covid-19 health crisis will subside by end-December this year and the implementation of structural reform under the IMF Extended Fund Facility to address macroeconomic imbalances will resume.

This means that while so far the trends show that the economy is getting back on its feet, in spite of earlier fears of further contraction, the future remains uncertain. Pakistan's success in controlling the virus and reopening its economy has been tempered with fears over a possible escalation in infection rates, even if business activity is picking up momentum. Still, the ADB projections about growth, a stable balance-of-payments situation in spite of a bigger current account gap of 2.4pc owing to an expected fall in remittances compared with 1.1pc last year, recovery in the industrial and agriculture sectors, and domestic demand growth, provide us with a reason for cautious optimism though it is too early for celebrations.

Improved GDP growth prospects aside, the report has also pointed out that Pakistan's economic expansion will remain significantly lower than that of other economies in the South Asian region. The economy of the Maldives, which was the most affected by the virus in the region, is likely to grow by 10.5pc. India, the second worst-affected country economically, is forecast to make a comeback with an 8pc GDP growth rate. Similarly, Bangladesh's economy is expected to expand by 6.8pc and Sri Lanka's by 4.1pc. The only countries to grow at a slower pace than Pakistan are Bhutan, Afghanistan and Nepal. The comparison is important because it underscores the structural issues plaguing the economy — the weaknesses that we have been long aware of but done little to tackle — which take us back to the IMF for a financial bailout every few years. Pakistan is not the only country to have experienced 'boom-and-bust' cycles. But it is certainly among those economies that have ignored deep-rooted structural issues for too long at the peril of the well-being of the citizenry. The Central African Republic, Chad, Nigeria and Afghanistan are the only countries that occupy a lower place than Pakistan among 153 nations on the Global Wellness Index. That says a lot about how our economy is faring.

Parliament shock

THIS week's tumultuous joint sitting of parliament was eerily reminiscent of last year's Senate session, where backdoor wheeling and dealing had resulted in the shock defeat of the no-confidence vote brought by the opposition against chairman Sadiq Sanjrani. On Wednesday, the 'Sanjrani model' wizardry was once again on full display during the joint sitting of parliament that President Alvi had summoned to get FATF-related bills passed. Even though the bills had earlier been rejected in the opposition-dominated Senate, the government managed to have three key FATF bills passed, along with five others. Despite having the numbers, the opposition yet again failed to block the bills despite vociferous criticism against the proposed amendments, which they allege grant sweeping powers of surveillance to the government. The PML-N's Shahid Khaqan Abbasi later said that "no businessmen will now be safe from NAB"; yet, over 30 legislators from the opposition ranks were mysteriously missing from the session, as against 16 absentees from the government's side. As a result, the first bill was passed with the majority of 10 votes. The number of votes cast by the government and its allies were at 200, while opposition members were said to be 190.

That the opposition with their numbers was defeated on such a significant day is shocking. If, as the opposition have said, the FATF bills are so damaging, why did such a significant number of parliamentarians skip proceedings on such an important day? Here, the confidence and body language of government legislators', especially of the prime minister, offer some clues. The way the joint session was called, it appears that the government circles had been assured that they would have the numbers to pass these bills at the time of voting. The prime minister's speech in the Assembly was akin to a victory speech delivered with the bullishness of one who knows they have secured the prize. This should be a moment of reckoning for the opposition: if their own members are working against them, why would the government take them seriously? But not only should the opposition get its house in order, the government, too, should have accepted some of the proposed amendments instead of relishing the apparent help it had in keeping so many opposition legislators away from the session. The entire episode is an affront to the sanctity of parliament. There should be no space for such manoeuvring in a healthy democracy.

Cricket grievances

CONTROVERSIES are not new to Pakistan cricket and the past 68 years have witnessed as much action off-field as on-field. The latest storm to hit the game is the abolishment of departmental cricket. The Pakistan Cricket Board, under its 2019 constitution, has revamped the domestic cricket structure which favours regional and provincial teams over departmental ones.

The deafening noise over the PCB's abrupt decision prompted head coach Misbah-ul-Haq, Test skipper Azhar Ali and senior player Mohammad Hafeez to call on Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday, to request him to review the decision which has rendered hundreds of cricketers jobless. However, the meeting proved fruitless, with Mr Khan telling his visitors to focus on their job and not interfere in policy matters. The meeting that took place without the PCB's knowledge has left cricket's top brass fuming.

In hindsight, the trio had approached Mr Khan with good intentions. However, it was a hasty move and one that violated the PCB's disciplinary rules, earning them the authorities' ire. Had they done their homework properly and consulted PCB chairman Ehsan Mani and CEO Wasim Khan prior to visiting Mr Khan, Misbah, Hafeez and Azhar would have had a good idea of what to expect.

It is no secret that the decision to abolish the departments was the brainchild of the prime minister himself. He has supported the regional format since his playing days. Being the patron of the board, Mr Khan has ensured its implementation through the PCB. It remains to be seen whether or not the new domestic set-up works for Pakistan cricket.

Nevertheless, a quick glance at sports in the country, including cricket, hockey, squash, athletics etc, is enough to show how pivotal departments have been in producing a majority of the country's legendary stars such as Hanif Mohammad, Fazal Mahmood, Jahangir Khan, Jansher Khan, Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis, Aisam-ul-Haq and indeed Mr Khan himself. In a nutshell, abolishing a tried and trusted system may not prove to be such a wise step.

Regional trade

THE decision to establish markets along Pakistan's borders with Afghanistan and Iran to boost trade underscores our weak economic relationship with our neighbours, apart from China. This is in spite of Pakistan's strategic location in the region and its links through surface routes with India in the east, and Afghanistan and Iran in the west. Moreover, across Afghanistan are the Central Asian Republics. And we continue to have a significantly large untapped market beyond India. Unfortunately, the share of Pakistan's intra-regional trade has declined in the last 10 years with exports to neighbouring countries falling from 12.2pc of its total overseas shipments in 2011 to 7.4pc in 2018. Similarly, Pakistan's regional imports have dropped from 7.4pc of its total global purchases to 4.7pc during the same period.

Numerous historical factors, political disputes, security issues and trade barriers have hampered regional trade integration. In the east, the Kashmir dispute has prevented Islamabad and New Delhi from establishing deeper trade ties. In effect, Pakistan doesn't enjoy comfortable trade relations with any South Asian nation with the exception of Sri Lanka. In India's case it is no different. The adversarial relations between India and Pakistan have effectively buried the dream of a free-trade area in South Asia. In the west, Afghanistan has been an important trade partner. Yet bilateral trade remains much below its actual potential because of Afghanistan's internal security conditions as well as a huge trust gap between the two states. Islamabad's refusal to extend transit trade rights to India and Afghanistan owing to security and other reasons is reciprocated by Kabul's refusal to allow us access to Central Asia through its territory, sealing the fate of an east-west trade corridor connecting South Asia with the Central Asian Republics. The only way for Pakistan to trade with Central Asia is through China, a route that remains closed five months of the year because of harsh weather. With Iran under US-sponsored sanctions, it has become impossible to develop strong, formal trade ties with Tehran.

Intra-regional trade plays a key role in the economic development and competitiveness of countries and is directly linked with their GDP growth rates. Take the example of EU and the Southeast Asian and East Asian economies. EU regional trade constitutes 65pc of the bloc's international

trade. In East Asia this ratio is 35pc and in Southeast Asia 25pc, compared to 5pc in South Asia. According to World Bank data, intra-regional trade accounts for about 1pc of South Asia's GDP compared to almost 11pc for East Asia and the Pacific. It is absurd to expect that Pakistan alone can dismantle the trade barriers that limit regional economic growth. All stakeholders should work towards regional cooperation and learn from the experiences of other trading blocs. The increase in regional economic integration will lead to greater interdependence and faster growth, and ultimately create a strong constituency for peace across the region.

Sealing schools

REOPENING educational institutes during the coronavirus pandemic was never going to be easy. Of late, the challenge for the authorities and school teachers has become even more difficult as some schools and colleges have reported active Covid-19 cases or have been found violating SOPs.

Some schools were sealed in Karachi this week after a surprise visit by the Sindh education minister revealed that pre-primary classes were going on although only students of classes 9 to 12 have been allowed to go back to school. In fact, in view of SOP violations, the minister on Friday announced a week's delay in the resumption of classes 6 to 8 in the province. In Peshawar, the health department recommended the sealing of some schools and classrooms in the city as well as in other areas of KP after Covid-19 cases were detected among students and staff. Several private schools were also sealed for violating SOPs. In Islamabad, too, some students and staff tested positive.

With research indicating low risk to children, it was important for schools to be reopened after prolonged disruption. Students have suffered tremendously during the lockdown and the government's decision to reopen educational institutes as the national tally of overall cases lowered was a pragmatic step towards normalcy.

But the threat from Covid-19 at these institutes is ever-present. Schools can be super-spreading venues, and, although the risk to young people is comparatively low, students can transmit Covid-19 to vulnerable people in their communities and households.

If the government wishes to control the spread of the virus with the success it demonstrated in recent months, it must tackle the presence of Covid-19 cases in schools proactively. This can only be possible if testing is increased.

At present, we have just about crossed a daily testing total of 33,000 — a figure which is far too low when we consider that around the same number of tests were carried out during the peak of the pandemic when the country was in lockdown. For the first time in a month, 700 new Covid-19 cases were reported in a single day on Sept 17. To protect vulnerable citizens and healthcare workers who have made tremendous sacrifices in this crisis, testing must be increased and random sampling conducted in schools so that the chances of a second wave can be minimised. Unless that is done, all efforts would have been of no use.

BRT fires

THE news reports about the disruption of the Peshawar BRT are disturbing. The service was suspended on Wednesday after a fourth bus in the system caught fire since the much-awaited launch of the bus rapid transit system a few weeks ago in August. Fortunately, in this instance, too, there were no casualties even though there were passengers on board when the fire erupted. The emergency situation was overcome quickly but the scare itself will take a lot of dousing, and another round of political blame game has been impossible to avoid. The project had been at the centre of a long row between the PTI government in KP and its rivals, and was flaunted as a symbol of the ruling party's version of urban development as opposed to the PML-N model of public transport on the roads of Lahore and Multan. The project is the source of much bad blood between the political camps and the basis of criticism against Prime Minister Imran Khan's caretakers in KP because of the time and resources spent on it. The BRT's launch was seen as a new phase in the journey to vindicate the PTI's determination to go ahead with a controversial project. However, the fires breaking out in the buses have threatened to prolong negative publicity for a service which needs to be run efficiently.

Over and above political expediency, the BRT is intended to facilitate the hustle and bustle of daily life in an expanding Peshawar. A project such as

the BRT that was accomplished after a very visible struggle must not be left exposed to risks that can turn it into an uncontrollable mess. The first spark should have been sufficient for an efficient administration to quickly investigate the matter and put right the flaws in order to ensure the safety of commuters. After all, the BRT does not belong to a political party or a company. It is the property of the public at large, something that the ruling class and the opposition should recognise.

MPC opportunity

THE opposition's multiparty conference scheduled to take place in Islamabad today is a significant event by all standards. The speech by former prime minister and PML-N leader Mian Nawaz Sharif is expected to be the star attraction. The opposition parties led by the PML-N, PPP and the JUI-F among others have been struggling in the last two years to forge a united strategy against the PTI government. The competing and often conflicting agendas of these parties and their respective leaderships have hindered the process of unified action in parliament and outside in the streets. When JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman staged a well-attended dharna outside Islamabad late last year, other opposition parties failed to join up with him and finally he had to return empty-handed. Since then, there have been multiple occasions when opposition parties have let each other down, or failed to agree on a common goal, much to the relief of the government. To add to these woes, the opposition has also been unable to develop a potent narrative against the government despite the latter's unsatisfactory record of governance at the federal and provincial levels.

Today's MPC provides the opposition an opportunity to set aside its differences, reach an agreement on a line of action and map out a strategy that is practical and implementable. It will also give Nawaz Sharif a platform to spell out for his party, and for the opposition in general, how he wants to take on the government. This is particularly important because Mr Sharif has remained silent for more than two years while his party has vacillated between the determined position of his daughter and the cautious politics of his brother. This has resulted in ambiguity within the rank and file of the party. What Mr Sharif says today may end this confusion and make it clear what the PML-N stands for at this moment in time. It will also be quite

apparent whether other opposition parties are willing to go along with whatever position he adopts, especially if it pertains to the role of the establishment.

If the opposition parties announce a joint plan of action today, it would have a significant bearing on the politics of the next three years. It is no secret that the government will gain a majority in the Senate after the elections in March next year. This means the opposition will not be in a position to defeat the government inside parliament. Unless they have a plan that can deliver results within the next six months, chances are the opposition will settle for a strategy that can be sustained for a longer period. This could mean a greater emphasis on action outside parliament. In any case, one can expect the opposition to get more proactive and ratchet up the political temperature after today's meeting.

Russian 'interference'

IN the cold world of realpolitik both democracies and authoritarian states use propaganda and psychological warfare to discredit and dishearten opponents. As the US presidential election approaches, there are growing voices emerging from the American intelligence community that point to Russian, Chinese and Iranian 'interference' in the November polls. Recently, the FBI chief claimed that there was a "steady drumbeat of misinformation" emanating from Russia targeting Donald Trump's Democratic challenger Joe Biden, as well as the legitimacy of the American political process. American intelligence agencies have also alleged that Moscow worked to support Mr Trump in the 2016 polls and discredit Democratic nominee Hilary Clinton.

Unsavoury as these claims are, the fact is that states all over the world employ such underhand methods to influence events and populations beyond their borders. For example, during the Cold War, the exchange of propaganda between the US and the Soviets was intense, as both sides worked overtime to demonise each other in the public view. However, this is not to say that these methods are legitimate; sovereignty should be an inviolable principle in the realm of international relations, and foreign interference in elections cannot be tolerated. Moscow should not be meddling in Washington's internal matters and the American people should be the ones deciding the future of their country. Yet as the past few decades have shown, America has used the very same tactics that many within the US establishment are criticising their foreign rivals of deploying. Across the mostly developing world, the US has worked hard to help tinpot dictators keen to serve it, while bringing down democratic governments that refused to toe its line. This has been a steady pattern in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Whether it was the 1953 overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq's elected government in Iran — an Anglo-American adventure — or the invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983 by the US to get rid of a leftist government, America has long meddled in the affairs of sovereign states, all the while throwing international law to the wind. More recently, there were claims that Mr Trump wanted to "take out" Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad, before the plan was vetoed by the then US defence chief. Indeed, all states must respect the bounds of international law and the principle of non-interference, especially those powerful states that have a history of flouting such conventions.

Penniless lawmakers?

THOSE who decide what part of their incomes the citizens of this country should give in taxes to finance the affairs of the state brazenly avoid paying their own share, in spite of living a life of privilege and luxury. What else defines the elite capture of the state if not this? Few parliamentarians, if any, might have felt remorse when finance adviser Hafeez Sheikh disclosed on Friday that 311 members of the National Assembly and 90 senators had collectively paid just Rs800m in taxes on their income during the tax year 2018. Members of the provincial assemblies have together paid even less — Rs340m, according to the sixth tax directory released by the FBR. Many

legislators, including two federal ministers, Faisal Vawda and Zartaj Gul, did not pay any income tax at all while the likes of Sardar Yar Muhammad Rind deposited Rs400, Zulfiqar Bachani Rs388 and Kanwal Shozab Rs165. Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar, too, did not earn enough to qualify as a taxpayer.

It is unfair to accuse legislators of avoiding taxes. There is every possibility that their incomes fell below the taxable threshold or were exempt from tax payment. Yet the luxurious lifestyle of a vast majority of legislators from the treasury and opposition benches tells a different story. The imported cars they drive, the large homes they live in, the schools their children go to, their foreign vacations and multiple pilgrimages create doubt in the minds of the people who pay more income tax despite being unable to afford a decent education for their children or healthcare costs. The tax directory is important for the sake of transparency and accountability but it is not enough. The FBR's job is to audit the legislators' returns and ensure that the taxes they paid matches their lifestyles. Where their incomes are tax-exempt, it is advisable to review those exemptions. Legislators must pay their share of taxes and willingly present themselves for audit if the tax culture is to be promoted in the country.

Sectarian tensions

THE embers of hate are once again being stoked. To prevent history from being repeated and innocent blood spilled in the name of religion, the government must act urgently and decisively. The PPP's parliamentary leader in the Senate, Sherry Rehman, sounded the alarm in the upper house on Friday when she brought up the intensifying anti-Shia campaign and described it as "extremely shocking that this issue is not being raised".

The state's silence is indeed inexplicable. It appears to have wilfully chosen to close its eyes to this sinister development. Recently in Karachi, three 'Azmat-i-Sahaba' rallies were taken out on successive days — the first and second by Deobandi and Barelvi organisations respectively, and the third by the Ahle Hadith.

The first two were mammoth gatherings, underscoring how quickly matters could go out of the authorities' control if the momentum by ultra right-wing

elements is sustained. Takfiri slogans were raised by the crowd at one of the events and an imambargah along the route was reportedly pelted with stones by participants. Emboldened by this unchecked show of extremism, a similar rally in Islamabad on Thursday openly included members of the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat with its leader Maulana Ahmed Ludhianvi among the speakers.

Why were gatherings with an obviously sectarian, and thereby inherently violent, agenda allowed in the first place? Why was the leader of a banned group given free rein to address the crowd? Where is the adherence to the National Action Plan with its requirement of dealing firmly with sectarian terrorists and preventing the re-emergence of proscribed organisations? The state has no qualms in cracking down on rights-based protests by health workers, teachers, handicapped people, progressive students, etc. But it appears to lose its nerve when confronted with hate-spewing divisive elements.

Although much progress has been made by Pakistan in dismantling militant organisations and curbing terror financing, rallies by sectarian elements do not make for good optics, nor give the impression of a state in control. Even when they are 'Pakistan-focused', violent extremists destabilise society and inevitably create conditions for 'transnational' groups to find a foothold. We have been down this road before.

The situation is ominous. While it is difficult to say definitively what has provided the impetus for this renewed sectarian tension, it first manifested itself around the time of the debate over Punjab's divisive Tahaffuz-i-Bunyad-i-Islam bill. Then during Muharram, blasphemy cases were filed against at least 40 Shias in connection with speeches at their religious gatherings. That, as we well know, leaves them vulnerable to being murdered by vigilantes. Sectarian violence blighted over two decades of this country's existence, claimed thousands of lives and drove away qualified professionals from Pakistan; around 70 doctors were killed, mainly on sectarian grounds, between 2010 and 2014 alone. The authorities cannot afford to be timorous in their response to the looming threat.

Reviving local film

FINALLY, the big screen is in the picture again. Prime Minister Imran Khan is seeking to revive the local film industry. Special Assistant retired Lt-Gen Asim Bajwa has been working towards this goal for a while. The first emerging details speak of attempts to restore a situation where stakeholders do not have to wait for long to get their share of revenue from the business. The new plan puts emphasis on building new cinema houses in the country after the winds of change swept most of them away. The effects of the nightmare that reduced the number of good old 'picture houses' from more than 1,100 at one time to around 30 by the dawn of the 21st century persist in so many ways. Ultimately, these are just a few signs of the demise of an industry that had given people employment and entertainment in an era when cultural expressions were worth investing in, there being always much room for improvement. These old-mould cinema halls are very much a part of the Pakistani romance with film as it once unfolded on the screen. Similarly, low-income audiences who once thronged the most colourfully adorned theatres in the city are integral to the local film nostalgia. The wish for the return of this winning combination of yore, which appears to be part of the cinema revival dream, will have to stand the test of today's economic realities.

In recent years, multiplexes have tried to woo back and compensate for the old audience as a commercially viable alternative, with crucial conditions attached. These multiplexes are an expensive entertainment option and the screening of Indian films was vital to their business. Covid-19 has dealt another blow to the multiplexes and some of them are said to be on the verge of closing down. If we can't allow the Indians in, how fast can we produce our own films, of high quality, and have people trickle back to the cinema halls? This is just one of the many issues indicating how tricky this road is. Cinema in the country can only be revived and prosper in conditions that are conducive to creative thinking. Ensuring these conditions will require much more than government support for a few selected ventures. Essentially, we are talking of eliminating taboos that prevent an exploration of the cinema as one of the most powerful and globally popular means of communication.

Plastic ban

ON Thursday, the Lahore High Court ordered the Environmental Protection Agency to ensure the complete ban on the manufacturing, sale and use of plastic bags in Punjab; and it gave shop owners 10 days to comply with the order. Earlier, in February, the court had banned the use of polythene and plastic bags at all mega stores in Lahore; the ban was later extended to Gujranwala and Faisalabad. This is not the first time such a ban has been put in place, and like previous attempts, it is just as unlikely to be successful this time around. Each attempt has been met with resistance, or followed briefly, only for shop owners and customers to quickly go back to the old ways of doing business. In 2006, the Sindh government first took the initiative to ban the hazardous material from the province, followed by repeated attempts in 2014, 2018, and then again in October 2019. Federal governments, too, have tried to impose bans on the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags. Most recently, the PTI government, which is perhaps ostensibly the most environmentally conscious government in our history, imposed a ban on single-use plastic bags in Islamabad and its surrounding areas on Aug 14, 2019. But this did little to change the reality on ground.

According to estimates, Pakistan consumes between 55bn to 112bn bags each year. There is little doubt about the health and environmental harms of single-use plastics: they clog drains, pollute natural waterways, and make their way into the digestive systems of animals. And yet, despite these periodical bans, the practicality of single-use plastic bags, the lack of availability or awareness of alternatives, the low cost of manufacturing, along with the difficulties in enforcing the law, have made it difficult to discard the hazardous material from our everyday lifestyles. Until practical alternatives can be offered, taking into account the ground realities of people's lives, all well-meaning attempts to make a long-term impact are bound to fail.

MPC resolution

THE opposition has once again united against a shared adversary. Still, Sunday's multiparty conference, where more than 10 political parties with

varying ideologies joined to form an alliance, is in many ways a unique event. Christened the 'Pakistan Democratic Movement', the alliance unequivocally hit out at what it said was the unrelenting interference of the establishment and intelligence agencies in political affairs. Former premier Nawaz Sharif, declared an absconder by a court, broke his two-year silence by taking the lead in the onslaught. On the basis of his experience as prime minister, and that of prime ministers in the past, he spoke of constant intervention by elements belonging to "a state above a state". His criticism of alleged interference by the security establishment in civilian affairs may have been construed as an outburst of a politically aggrieved person, but his sentiments were reflected in the strongly worded resolution which made references to this encroachment. The unanimously adopted resolution also took the same position and called for the establishment to adopt a neutral and apolitical role.

Pakistan's chequered past has seen many a military takeover, with the unfortunate result that the security establishment in the country has remained involved in civilian affairs even when the military has not been in power. However, it is also a fact that their involvement has largely been accepted — even encouraged — by political parties in the past few decades, as they sought help to oust political rivals. Although both Shahbaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari say they have learnt from past mistakes, it is difficult to predict how these parties will practically galvanise support on their foremost issue of 'non-interference of the establishment' when their present aim is to oust the incumbent PTI. Forming opposition alliances is relatively easy, and our country's history is full of them. The daunting aspect, however, is achieving a shared goal. Very rarely have such alliances fulfilled their objectives on their own. Such ambitions in the past became realities only with the help of extra-constitutional forces that the opposition is taking on. These forces, too, have manipulated situations to their advantage and taken charge of the country.

This time, the challenge is even bigger. In these early days, it is unclear how the PDM alliance will oust the government and simultaneously neutralise its alleged backers. Much will depend on the revised charter of democracy that they have promised to prepare and adopt. The coming days will decide how committed these parties are to their pledges at the MPC and the resolutions adopted there. Until then, the political game of push and pull may go on, with

the government maintaining its age-old position that the alliance is a group of corrupt politicians, and turning its guns on Nawaz Sharif for leading the way for a future street agitation from what appears to be a self-imposed exile.

Global Covid-19 cases

AS countries continued with the unhappy dance of locking down and then reopening, the total number of Covid-19 cases worldwide crossed the 30m mark last week. Daily global cases are averaging close to 300,000. This figure is a sharp increase from July when worldwide cases diagnosed each day averaged about 200,000. The new cases are accelerating at a rate which shows that it took merely five weeks to cross the latest milestone of 10m; the first 10m were reached after six months. According to data compiled by a team of infectious disease experts at Johns Hopkins University, the US remains the worst-hit country with more than 6.6m confirmed infections, and nearly 200,000 deaths even though the number of new infections per day has been dropping after a spike in July. In Asia, India is driving the numbers with confirmed infections surpassing 5m — the world's second highest after the US. While the death rate in India is relatively lower as compared to the size of its population, the virus is spreading faster there than in any other country as it clocks 100,000 cases per day. This spread is largely attributed to the lifting of restrictions to boost economic activity, but is also a reflection of increased testing. After India, Brazil has the third-highest number of cases at over 4m but sadly, the most number of deaths at 140,000. The global total for coronavirus-related deaths is fast approaching a staggering 1m.

It is clear that Covid-19 is not going away anytime soon, with some fearing that even with a vaccine the threat will persist. Just last week, the WHO warned Europe of a Covid-19 surge and said the data from September should serve as a “wake-up call”. As several countries brace for a serious surge and second wave, it is important to remember that science and the research on Covid-19 today have evolved from when the virus first hit earlier in the year. Then, hospitals lacked equipment, and staff had to work on Covid-19 patients without adequate PPE. But today, many countries are better equipped to tackle the infection. Still, having more information does

not mean that recklessness should be permitted. Countries must strategise their next steps by thinking of the most vulnerable among the population as well as those working in healthcare and delivering essential services. As has been demonstrated, with compassion and a data-driven approach to restrictions, loss can be minimised.

In search of a temple

MEMBERS of the Pakistan Hindu Council have emphasised that having a mandir and a crematorium site in Islamabad was an 'essential' requirement which ought not to be politicised. The appeal is the latest attempt at a solution following a controversy over the construction of a temple in the capital. Lal Chand Malhi, a PTI lawmaker, is among those trying to bring out the apolitical nature of the move in an apparent effort to build consensus on the mandir by answering the questions being raised regarding its construction. In a press talk, he recalled that the land for the temple and crematorium was allotted in 2018, when a PML-N government was in power in the country. Around 3,000 Hindus are said to be living in Islamabad. Many of them, activists say, were forced to shift here from parts of KP, Sindh and Balochistan to escape a deteriorating law-and-order situation. This means that they have been through a lot and could do with some looking after by the state as they are citizens of this country.

Objections were raised after the prime minister approved an amount of Rs100m to build the temple. Soon after, as some political parties such as the PML-Q and JUI-F joined religious groups in passionately opposing the temple, construction was stopped. Among the points raised, the opponents said that the tax paid by Muslims could not be spent on a mandir and also that an Islamic country could not allow the building of a new temple on its territory. Mr Malhi has tried to address both questions, saying that money from the taxes paid by Pakistani Hindus could be spent on building the mandir and that there are Muslim countries such as the UAE which have allowed new temples to be constructed. A solution has to be found. The Hindu community is not just looking for a place to pray but also to hold ceremonies. Let's see how the government responds to the ideas put forward by the council's members.

Anti-state' label

THE government's reaction to Nawaz Sharif's scorching speech at the opposition's multiparty conference on Sunday is sadly not unexpected in the current polarised atmosphere, but that makes it no less objectionable.

At a press conference on Monday, senior federal ministers including Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Asad Umar, Fawad Chaudhry and Shibli Faraz accused the speakers at the MPC, particularly the former premier, of being 'anti-Pakistan'. They claimed the opposition was promoting the enemy's agenda by levelling allegations against national institutions like the army, NAB and ECP. Mr Umar also said the MPC was proof that Prime Minister Imran Khan was right when he said at the beginning of his tenure that "the opposition has everything at stake ... and when accountability moves forward, they will all get together".

With the political discourse having become increasingly reductive, it now takes very little for wild allegations of being 'anti-state' to be bandied about. The shameful precedent that began with the sister of this country's founder being declared a foreign agent in a state-sponsored advertisement campaign during Gen Ayub Khan's government has come of age in a political arena where healthy debate seems a passé concept. That said, the ministers' contention that the opposition have joined hands in order to neutralise the corruption charges against them is not without merit.

The prime minister has also repeatedly alleged the same self-interest on their part, particularly in connection with the passage of FATF-related legislation. There are serious charges of corruption against several leading opposition figures, including Mr Sharif, and they must face them in a court of law, regardless of the outcome. That will increase their stature and lend credibility to their claims of fighting for democracy. A stint in prison, even on trumped-up charges, has rarely done a politician's career any harm — quite the contrary in fact.

Meanwhile, if, as his ministers maintain, the prime minister is indeed the one in the driving seat, he should put a stop to his predecessor being denounced as 'anti-state' and accused of trying to please India by criticising the army. It is a repugnant line of attack. Certainly, there are serious differences between the government and the opposition on a variety of issues.

The former appears hell-bent on pursuing the current mode of accountability while the latter believes it is being unfairly hounded and that the government would not last a day without the support of extra-constitutional forces. Instead of preaching to the choir, both sides should start a healthy political 'fight' that draws the line at accusing each other of being unpatriotic or working against Pakistan. They would do well to consider that it serves our enemies well when our leaders engage in such recrimination. We lost this country's eastern wing nearly four decades ago amidst precisely such vicious rhetoric and politics of vilification. This must stop now.

GB as a province?

IN a major development, all political parties have agreed to accord Gilgit-Baltistan the status of a province. According to this understanding, the parties have decided they will take this significant step after the elections in GB that are due shortly. The opposition had demanded that integrating GB into the federation should not be treated as a partisan issue and therefore should wait so electioneering does not impact the debate adversely. It will require a constitutional amendment which will pass smoothly once the parties have agreed on the exact parameters of this step. This has been a long-standing demand of the people of GB because they have been in a constitutional limbo for decades. This has led to deep grievances and political unrest that have continued to fester in the absence of any serious attempt by Islamabad to address them. In this sense, the decision to make GB a province is a welcome step. However, there are caveats. The final status of GB is connected to the ultimate resolution of the Kashmir dispute. The main reason that Pakistan had not integrated GB into the federation was to ensure that such a step should not impact the disputed status of Kashmir as per the resolutions of the United Nations. In August last year, the BJP government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi annexed India-held Kashmir by revoking its special status. There is concern that by integrating GB as a province, Pakistan may weaken its case in the way that India has. However, the problem may be addressed if Pakistan can say GB's status as a province will be a provisional one and the final status will depend on the resolution of the Kashmir issue. It could keep our legal position on Kashmir intact while providing the people of GB the full constitutional status they have always deserved.

The political leadership should tackle this issue with maturity and adopt an approach that is non-partisan. There should be a full debate in parliament and all legal and international aspects of the matter should be discussed in detail. The final amendment should have a watertight text that is vetted by experts of international law keeping in mind the requirements of the UN resolutions on Kashmir. Once done, the amendment should enjoy unanimous support to announce to the world that Pakistan stands firmly behind this decision. This is a momentous step and should be accorded the attention it deserves.

Anger against KE

THE rowdy behaviour of participants at a hearing organised by power-sector regulator Nepra to seek public opinion on its proposal to end K-Electric's monopoly over the distribution of electricity among the residents of Karachi took the focus off the real issue: how to resolve the city's power woes in a sustainable manner. Instead, the verbal clash that ensued between two groups of political and civil society activists led the Nepra chief to first suspend the proceedings and then adjourn the hearing for a later date in Islamabad. Unfortunately, the choice of venue will not make it possible for Karachi residents who want to discuss the pros and cons of KE's monopoly to contribute to the discussion. There is no doubt that emotions against the country's only privatised distribution company are running high because of the days-long blackout in many parts of the city during the recent torrential rains. Public anger against the utility is totally understandable. Yet the issue needs a dispassionate and informed discussion so that a solution can be found.

Until recently, KE was praised by many for improving service delivery and ending blackouts in many areas. The company has invested significant sums to increase its own generation and improve its distribution network and reduce outages since privatisation. But it is also true that the dilapidated electricity distribution network still requires large investments to remedy the problems. KE claims its planned infrastructure investment will end blackouts in 95pc of the city by 2023, when its monopoly status expires. There is a caveat though in the shape of timely approvals of projects by the government and other agencies. Indeed, there's no alternative to market

competition when it comes to improving service delivery. But we are still far from developing a framework to have a competitive retail electricity market. Until that stage arrives, the regulator would do well to ensure that KE executes its infrastructure development investments on a fast-track basis, and that it is held accountable if it fails to make good on its commitments.

Baldia fire convictions

EIGHT years ago this month, 264 men and women were burned alive in an inferno that engulfed the garment factory in Karachi where they worked. It is only now that some measure of justice has been done (albeit Dawn is opposed to the death penalty) in that ghastly tragedy which ranks among the world's deadliest industrial disasters.

An antiterrorism court on Tuesday awarded capital punishment to two former MQM activists and sentenced four gatekeepers of the factory to life imprisonment, while acquitting party leader Rauf Siddiqui. It appears the men, acting on the orders of the then chief of MQM's Karachi Tanzeemi Committee Hammad Siddiqui, set the building ablaze after the factory owners did not pay Rs250m extortion or offer a share in their business.

When the crime was committed, the party had a mafia-like grip over much of Karachi. A story was put about that the fire was caused by an electrical short circuit due to poor maintenance and the police filed an FIR against the factory owners. It was in early 2015, by which time the Karachi operation had defanged the MQM, that the case took a dramatic turn. A Rangers report, based on an MQM activist's confession from nearly two years earlier, held the party — then led by Altaf Hussain — as being squarely responsible for the fire.

However, one of the main accused, Hammad Siddiqui, is still ostensibly on the run. A report some three years ago claiming he had been arrested in Dubai was denied by law-enforcement authorities; whether that is true, or whether a 'confessional' video will surface at an opportune time in the future, is difficult to tell. There are always some trump cards that are kept in play by the powers that be — and the ones that have outlived their usefulness are discarded. Saulat Mirza is a case in point.

Nevertheless, the convictions of most of the accused will bring some solace to the victims' families. That said, the Baldia fire stands out because it was an unparalleled atrocity; the thuggish regime on whose watch it took place thrived on criminality as a matter of course. MQM cadres, armed to the teeth, would paralyse the entire city at a moment's notice, disrupting people's lives and livelihoods on the whims of their leader-in-exile in London. The party's network of ruthless sector and unit 'in-charges' in collusion with some of the party's top leaders was involved in multiple rackets including extortion, china-cutting, etc. Those who put up any resistance or simply happened to come in the way, paid the ultimate price.

While the Karachi operation managed to nab several MQM 'assets', those higher up the ladder — including the ones who gave the orders — are now part of the MQM-P and the Pak Sarzameen Party. The politics of expediency has given them a new lease of life.

Circular debt worries

PAKISTAN'S circular debt challenge is getting bigger by the day and the government is struggling hard to get a firm handle on the problem, which is threatening the very stability of the power sector. Notwithstanding the claims by ministers and other government officials of having controlled the pace of increase in the power-sector debt stock, the latter has almost doubled over the last couple of years to reach Rs2.1tr. The government has time and again declared that the pace of monthly growth in the quasi-fiscal debt size had been arrested and brought down to Rs10bn-12bn from Rs38bn during the last PML-N government. But in effect, the debt rose by almost Rs45bn a month during the previous financial year. A recent study by a private power company has predicted the size of the circular debt — or the amount of cash shortfall within the Central Power Purchasing Agency system that the agency is unable to pay to its power suppliers — to double in the next five years if it is not brought under control. That would be quite a scary situation given that the country is still being run on borrowed money and its economy is groping in the dark.

The growing power-sector debt is generally considered one of the biggest threats to the stability of the sector, as well as the government's budget. There are numerous reasons for the appearance of circular debt in the mid-

2000s and its increase, ranging from expensive power purchasing agreements with private producers and exorbitantly high system losses to unrecovered bills, corruption and mismanagement of state-owned distribution companies. However, it is surprising to see a federal government minister simplify the problem by putting the entire blame on the previous rulers. Indeed, the present government has inherited the issue from its predecessor. Yet the people have a right to ask as to what it has done in the last two years to manage it and why it has been pursuing the same power policies followed by the previous administration. After all, it is the people that have to bear the brunt of wrong power policies and gross mismanagement of the sector in the form of electricity rates that are higher than the regional average. With the PTI into its third year in power, the public expects it to come up with a tangible short- to long-term power-sector reform programme to fix matters instead of constantly looking back.

Tips for a neighbour

A NUMBER of factors have been identified in the investigation to ascertain the reasons behind the huge outbreak of Covid-19 next door in India. It is said the lockdown was hastily and clumsily imposed and the resultant mass return home of millions of workers from the cities led to a spread of the virus to a point where India is only behind the US in terms of the countries worst hit by Covid-19. Over 5m cases of Covid-19 have been diagnosed in India. Of these, no less than 90,000 people have lost their lives. As yet, there are no signs of the pandemic subsiding. The stories from across the border, highlighted in the official bulletins of the highest Pakistani government functionaries in an effort to prove the success of their own anti-coronavirus strategy, raises one basic question that has the tendency to crop up frequently in the history of Pakistan-India affairs: was there something that one neighbour could learn from the other?

There is no running away from comparisons between the two countries. Over time, knowledge gained through experiences in one country has benefited the other, especially in the area of healthcare, given the similarities in health conditions. To say that there have not been queries from across the border to find out what strategies Pakistan has employed to keep the situation from worsening would be implausible. There have been more than

307,418 recorded Covid-19 cases in Pakistan and so far less than 6,500 deaths. Matters could have been worse, considering international trends and initial local projections. Not all answers may be known as yet and we will need a full-scale socioeconomic study to understand the causes for the spread and containment of the virus. But surely there are some handy tips that India could pick up right away. Pakistani officials have repeatedly pointed out where the Narendra Modi government was going wrong in its tackling of the Covid-19 pandemic. They could also offer the neighbouring country some help in correcting the lapses.

India's losing battle

IN a major interview after his release from house arrest, former chief minister of India-held Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, has bitterly criticised the Indian government's scrapping of the special status of the occupied territory and said that Kashmiris would rather accept Chinese rule than Indian.

The pro-India Kashmiri leader who is seen by most Kashmiris as a betrayer to their cause, acknowledged that Kashmiris felt like "slaves" and would rise up in protest once the draconian curfew was lifted. He was very clear that the abrogation of Kashmir's special status as a semi-autonomous region was unacceptable to every Kashmiri and he would struggle to have the status restored.

Farooq Abdullah also said that the differences between his family and that of Mehbooba Mufti — another pro-India former chief minister of occupied Kashmir currently under house arrest — had been settled and that they would work together.

It is clear that India's move last August to scrap Articles 370 and 35A of its constitution and deprive J&K of its special status has had disastrous results. The step by the BJP government has confirmed beyond a shadow of doubt what the people of Kashmir had feared all along, ie New Delhi wants to forcefully take control of their land by changing its demography and diluting its Muslim and Kashmiri identity. In the year since then, the BJP government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has legislated a new domicile law that enables Hindus to settle and buy property in J&K.

The intent is unambiguous: convert IHK into a Hindu-majority area and deprive Kashmiris of the political and administrative strength that comes with being a majority in their own land. In the process, however, India has alienated every Kashmiri including its puppets like Farooq Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti. By converting IHK into an open-air jail, India has forced Kashmiris — even those previously aligned with it — to resist this occupation by whatever means possible. The price of this occupation is getting higher for India with each passing day.

This situation cannot be sustained. A growing number of voices within India are also calling out the BJP government for depriving IHK of its special status. Internationally also India is finding it hard to justify its actions. The resistance from the people is certain to increase with time. Now that compromised politicians such as Farooq Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti also stand alienated and ready to offer political resistance, India will face a tough time in the coming days.

Countries that can influence India should persuade Mr Modi to return to the path of sanity. In this context, sanity and rationality demand that India restore the special status of occupied Kashmir. The UN resolutions recognise the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir as disputed territory and the dispute's final resolution lies in the implementation of these resolutions.

Leaks after MPC

POST-MPC hysteria in Islamabad has unleashed a storm of leaks and clarifications, igniting a rare public debate about the propriety of meetings between opposition and military leaders. Two developments have come to light since last Sunday. The first is that, just ahead of the MPC, opposition leaders met the army and ISI chiefs to discuss the Gilgit-Baltistan elections. Second, some weeks earlier, the PML-N's Mohammad Zubair privately met the army and ISI chiefs for what he claimed were 'general discussions'. While the former Sindh governor stated that no relief was sought for Maryam and Nawaz Sharif, the DG ISPR said that both meetings featured discussions on PML-N's embattled leadership. That Mr Zubair met the army chief twice in the span of two weeks — in the presence of the ISI chief — is quite revealing, and belies his implication that the visits constituted little more than informal chitchats. What is significant here is that, despite the

opposition members' meetings, Mr Sharif launched a blistering attack on the establishment's alleged role in politics and that the MPC reinforced his position by adopting a tough resolution.

Meetings between opposition and military leaders, on the request of either side, have been a regular feature of our political history. Where issues of national security are concerned, the details are usually not revealed by participants. But the series of leaks and political statements of late about such engagements are a strong indicator of the thorny political games and unscrupulous backdoor schemes in progress. The developments raise several questions. Why were the 'disclosures' made after the MPC? Do they indicate panic? Or are politicians like Sheikh Rashid out to malign the opposition? Ironically, in his feverish revelations about opposition members' meetings with the army leadership, Mr Rashid also gave the impression that the establishment takes a deep interest in political affairs — something that could tarnish the image of the security apparatus. The weeks ahead will show whether or not the formal opposition alliance remains a united front or splits up on account of these revelations. Clarity from all quarters is needed. Perhaps more immediately, the opposition should explain its position on contacting and meeting the top ranks of the security establishment, especially in view of the MPC. Whatever the motive behind these leaks, they have been a source of embarrassment for the opposition politicians. Meanwhile, where the military leadership is concerned, the public discourse around such questionable, unofficial meetings with politicians begs introspection.

Gas shortages

WITH the winter months approaching, can gas shortages be far behind? The shortfalls have been part of life in Pakistan for over a decade, save for a few years under the previous government when the deficit was partially covered through expensive RLNG imports. Decreasing gas pressure around this time normally signals worsening gas supply in the winter as demand surges owing to the heating needs of domestic consumers. This year, the supply situation seems to have aggravated, particularly in Karachi and the rest of Sindh, much earlier than usual. Most consumers, especially industries in Karachi, are already complaining about supply disruptions and low pressure

as SSGC currently faces a deficit of 150mmcf. The state-owned utility warns that the gap will rise to 350mmcf in winter. Sadly, gas shortages for Karachi residents also mean constant electricity outages as SSGC cuts its supply to power producers and factories to serve domestic customers on a priority basis. It is quite agonising for the residents, who are still recovering from the impact of the unprecedented urban flooding some weeks ago, to have to also suffer long hours without electricity and gas.

In Punjab, SNGPL has already begun preparing its customers for the worst, warning industry of supply cuts during the peak winter months. With the country's gas demand estimated to be around 6-7bcfd against the domestic availability of 3.5bcfd and current reserves depleting by 9pc annually, and with no new discoveries in sight, the government estimates that Sindh, KP and Balochistan will also be facing supply deficits in the next few years, even if they stop sharing part of their supplies with Punjab. The gap is hard to fill without RLNG imports. With development of planned RLNG import capacity delayed, the next few winters are going to be quite harsh for all gas consumers. Instead of further delaying action, Islamabad should sit with the provinces to find a durable solution and increase supplies, instead of picking a fight with them, especially Sindh, so that it can mitigate the public's pain.

Agriculture data

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has ordered the food security ministry and the provinces to take measures for improving the accuracy of the agriculture supply chain data being collated by them. As part of his government's economic diplomacy initiative, he also directed the ministry to develop a food security dashboard for transmission of dependable information to all stakeholders in a transparent manner. The decision to improve the accuracy of agriculture data and develop the dashboard underscores the importance of reliable information collection for informed planning and policymaking. The ministry has been directed to take measures for gathering correct information related to production, consumption, waste, imports and exports of different agricultural commodities so that the government can ascertain the demand and supply situation for addressing food security challenges under the Prime Minister's Agriculture Emergency Programme.

The importance of data accuracy for setting agriculture policies and predicting accurate future demand and supply cannot be overstated. At the same time, the availability of reliable information helps improve the governance of supply chains, exposes market manipulators, controls smuggling of food and sudden spikes in its price, and predicts market conditions for import and export regarding a particular product or commodity to prevent shortages in the domestic market or losses to farmers, especially smallholders. The reasons for the recent recurrence of sugar and wheat shortages — and the resulting increase in price — can be traced to the absence of a reliable production and consumption record of the two commodities that limited the government's ability to correctly assess the situation and make timely decisions. There have been numerous instances where data-collecting departments and agencies reported incorrect production and consumption figures of major crops and horticulture products at the expense of growers and consumers.

Reliable data collection, especially in the agriculture sector, has never been a strong point of the relevant authorities. The basic information collected from the field is mostly extrapolated and is of poor quality. More important, it does not capture the entire supply chain or the smaller commodities and horticulture products. Also, the information is scattered at various levels of government, which means it cannot be used for analysing the exact supply situation, planning and policymaking. This is in spite of the availability of new, cheaper information-gathering tools, and modern satellite and mobile technology. The development of the proposed dashboard is expected to take care of data fragmentation. Yet for improving its accuracy, the government will have to encourage the use of technology at all levels. It will also need to ensure that the dashboard carries information on water availability for different crops, climate data and analyses of global markets to give a complete picture to stakeholders. This kind of data is not only required to predict the domestic market correctly but also to integrate our agriculture sector into the global supply chain.

Dormant Saarc

THE regional grouping of South Asian countries that promised so much once has been reduced to an instrument of politicking and brinkmanship. This

reality hit with full force once again as foreign ministers of the member countries met informally and virtually this week, in honour of the tradition that has been bringing them together on the sidelines of the annual UN General Assembly session.

Islamabad reiterated its commitment to hosting the 19th Saarc summit “in the spirit of regionalism and as per Pakistan’s commitment to the Saarc platform”. The 19th summit has been on hold since 2016 because of New Delhi’s refusal to participate. As a result, the regional bloc has been more or less dormant in an era in which neighbours are exceedingly dependent on each other, regional cooperation is considered crucial to national development and close economic, cultural and social linkages are essential investments in peace between countries divided by geographical boundaries.

India accused Pakistan of escalating ‘cross-border terrorism’ as it ruled out a regional summit four precious years ago and is sticking to more or less the same position, barring the addition of some emphasis here or a smirk there.

The current belligerence was in full view during the latest meeting of foreign ministers when Indian representatives allowed undiplomatic words such as “pernicious” to escape their lips. This was reflective of the old desire to somehow overwhelm and conceal any mention of what has to be their most embarrassing side — a glaring act of encroachment, the use of force and denial of the people’s rights and aspirations in India-held Kashmir.

Just how sensitive the Narendra Modi government is to any talk of the occupied land can be gauged from the fact that the Indian press, briefed obviously by officials, said that Pakistan had tried to raise Kashmir — even without naming it — three times at the foreign ministers’ meeting.

This, according to the logic applied across the border, constituted a breach of the Saarc principle which discourages taking up bilateral questions on a regional platform. This is quite a strange position for India to take — one big country with the capacity to impose its veto on others is accusing another state belonging to the same regional group of promoting cross-border terrorism. Does this not constitute bilateralism? The emphasis should be on saving the institution. Something created with so much difficulty must not be allowed to be held hostage to jingoistic chatter.

PMDC saga

THE controversy surrounding the arbitrary dissolution of the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council appears to be far from over. In the latest twist, officials of the Ministry of National Health Services sealed the Pakistan Medical Commission (until recently the PMDC) building in Islamabad and barred its employees from entering the premises under a “cease and desist” order. According to reports, the NHS spokesperson said that this step was being taken in light of the recently passed PMC Act by parliament. He said that Clause 28 calls for the setting up of a council that will decide what duties to assign to the concerned officials. This move by the federal government is the second such attack within a short span of time. In October 2019, the PMDC was dissolved by the government through an overnight ordinance and replaced with the PMC. PMDC employees had moved the court against this decision, leading the Islamabad High Court in February to restore the PMDC and declare the PMC illegal. In a separate case, the Supreme Court in August 2020 issued orders for the setting up of an 11-member ad hoc committee to manage the PMDC. Very recently, the PMC bill was pushed through a joint sitting of parliament without due deliberation by the National Assembly’s Standing Committee on National Health Services, and signed into law, thus increasing concerns that the removal of checks on private medical colleges would encourage commercial motives.

Even if the government’s intentions in reforming the regulation of medical colleges were sincere, its arrogant way of handling the situation has invited suspicion over the actual reason behind such drastic changes to the regulatory medical body. One wonders whether the fifth-largest population of the world, with a dilapidated and overstretched healthcare system, needs such a controversy in the midst of a global pandemic. The country’s healthcare workers, many of whom come from humble backgrounds, are already working in compromised conditions. They don’t deserve to be made to question their life choices for the benefit of a few.

PM’s UN speech

IN his speech to the UN General Assembly on Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan rightly highlighted the fact that the scourge of Islamophobia is growing,

and Muslims are being targeted in various parts of the world. He made particular mention of the worrying condition of Muslims in India where — under the BJP's watch — a majoritarian wave has gripped the country and Indian Muslims are being singled out as 'outsiders' by the Hindu ultra-right, from which the BJP has sprung. Moreover, Islamophobic sentiment in the West is also growing, fuelled by a number of factors, including increased immigration and as a reaction to the acts of violence unleashed by Islamist militant groups on Western soil.

Where the situation in India is concerned, Narendra Modi and company have very carefully peeled away nearly all vestiges of secularism in their effort to rechristen the state as a Hindu rashtra. Under this scheme of things, Muslims are eternal outsiders and not worthy of full citizenship. The Indian state's anti-Muslim policies have manifested themselves in legal edicts that seek to strip members of the community of citizenship, as well as lack of action where punishing perpetrators of violence against Muslims is concerned. In fact, senior Indian government functionaries have made comments regarding Muslims that in any civilised set-up would qualify as hate speech. The passage of laws designed to make it harder for Muslims to retain their citizenship; the lack of punishment for cow vigilantes; and the brutal siege of India-held Kashmir are all stark reminders of what it is like for Muslims to live in Mr Modi's India, as most of the world ignores this grim reality.

While in India's case anti-Muslim policies are being promoted by the state, in the West hatred is being stirred up mostly in reaction to the atrocious violence perpetrated by extremists in the name of Islam. Unfortunately, the brutality of Al Qaeda, IS and similar outfits is affecting the way non-Muslims in the West look at Islam, especially when fighters affiliated to these groups carry out acts of terrorism in Western states. This feeds the toxic narrative of the ultra-right in the US, Europe and elsewhere, whereby all Muslims are tarred with the same brush. As the prime minister has said, there is a need to address Islamophobia. This can be done through greater dialogue between the West and the Muslim world. It needs to be communicated clearly that those who act violently in the name of Islam do not represent the majority of Muslims. In fact, many of these groups have capitalised on the pitiful sociopolitical and economic conditions across the Muslim world, as well as failed Western attempts at nation-building in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria

etc. Also, the West must realise that republishing offensive caricatures or similar acts that offend Muslim sensitivities will only encourage extremism, and must be discouraged.

Harassing journalists

UNCONFIRMED reports this week of cases being registered against dozens of journalists under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, sparked panic and elicited condemnations from both members of the media and rights groups.

Fortunately, Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari later clarified on Twitter that the reports were untrue, and that the Federal Investigation Agency had not registered cases against journalists and activists, but that a private citizen had complained about 12 members of the media.

While the clarification brought some relief, the episode underscores the climate of fear in which journalists operate. It also reminds us of the spate of cases that have been filed against journalists in recent weeks.

In early September, an FIR was registered against journalist Asad Toor for posting “negative propaganda” against institutions and the army on his social media account. In the same period, a sedition case was registered against journalist and former Pemra chairman Absar Alam. Prior to this, journalist Bilal Farooqi of The Express Tribune was detained by police for allegedly “objectionable” material on social media which “defamed” the army.

A gift of the PML-N government in 2016, the draconian Peca has become for the authorities a convenient tool with which to silence criticism. In the guise of protecting the people, Peca has enabled the state to protect itself by blocking criticism and stripping citizens of their rights. It is the most sinister cybercrime legislation in the country as it goes beyond just computer-related crimes and gives authorities the licence to criminalise, restrict and prosecute free speech. Not only does it restrict freedom of expression online, it is now increasingly being used to attempt to jail journalists.

Section 37 of the Act gives sweeping powers to the PTA to block or remove online content, whereas Section 20 introduces criminal defamation through an ambiguous section with a three-year jail term and a hefty fine — both strong indicators of the legal framework for the erosion of free speech. As a result of this law and the way it is used, the media is experiencing an unprecedented wave of both imposed restrictions and self-censorship.

There is an urgent need for lawmakers to address this and take action — the first step of which should be the passing of the human rights ministry's comprehensive bill on the protection of journalists; the bill has been lying with the law ministry for months. Condemnation of individual cases of intimidation is not enough.

Children of the nation

EACH day brings new sorrow. On Friday, a minor boy's lifeless body was discovered inside a cloth bag by residents of Karachi's Federal B Area. The child had gone missing the evening before. Instead of reporting to the police, however, the area's residents took matters into their own hands. While searching for the boy, they came across a neighbour carrying a cloth bag, and found the child's body inside it. Doctors confirmed the parents' worst nightmare: the boy had been subjected to sexual abuse before he was murdered. Prior to this, the rape and murder of five-year-old Marwah in Karachi's Old Sabzi Mandi area sparked a wave of anger and protests. Her burnt body was found on a garbage heap by police two days after she went missing, reigniting memories of Zainab Ansari of Kasur, whose murder led to the creation of the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Act, 2020. The law aims to save missing and abducted children through the setting up of the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Agency, which will maintain a database, work closely with the 1099 helpline, and send alerts on various print and electronic mediums whenever a child goes missing.

According to NGO Sahil's most recent report, over eight children were sexually abused each day on average in the first six months of this year. The majority of cases were reported from rural Pakistan (62pc). Punjab reported the highest number (57pc), followed by Sindh (32pc) and KP (6pc). Between January and June 2020, 173 children were gang-raped; and 38 were murdered by their tormentors. Given that these figures only reflect the cases

that make it to the newspapers — in a country where it is still taboo to speak about such things and victims are apprehensive about approaching the police — the sheer number of unheard and unspoken stories would give anyone with a conscience sleepless nights. Physical and sexual abuse towards children is widespread, both within and outside the ‘safety’ of the home.

APS commission report

IS closure even possible for the survivors of the APS massacre and the families of those who lost loved ones on that terrible day? One hundred and forty-seven people, including 132 students, were martyred when militants attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar on Dec 16, 2014.

For hours, distraught parents — not knowing whether their children were alive or dead — were gathered at the entrance as security personnel fought pitched battles through the day with heavily armed assailants inside the premises. At the end of it, several areas of the school presented scenes of carnage, particularly the auditorium.

The families’ long, agonising struggle to have their voices heard and their burning questions answered — primarily about the lapses in security — has finally borne fruit. On Friday, the report by the judicial commission appointed two years ago to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the attack was furnished before the Supreme Court.

However, the 525-page document contains much information that is unlikely to be of substantial comfort to the families; indeed its findings reveal how a faster and better coordinated response could have thwarted the attack, or resulted in fewer deaths. Based on statements from victims’ families, police, bureaucrats and military personnel, as well as its own observations, the report delves into the three-layer security protocol meant to keep the school safe.

There were the guards at the gate, two Mobile Vigilance Teams in the vicinity, the Quick Response Force stationed 10 minutes away and the police’s Rapid Response Force for deployment in the cantonment area. One MVT was lured further afield by a simple decoy tactic: the attackers set alight

the vehicle in which they had arrived. That enabled them to sneak into the school premises from the back wall, a critical advantage because they took up their positions inside before anyone was aware an attack was underway.

The inquiry found it inexplicable that the guards displayed total inertia when the sounds of gunfire were first heard from within. The victims' parents also questioned why the police were not allowed to enter despite having arrived on the scene and notwithstanding that the commandos had not yet reached the site. Above all though, the report regretted that locals had provided shelter to some of the terrorists, thereby facilitating them in their evil designs.

This was a tragedy so monumental that it will likely remain forever seared in the national consciousness. What happened in its aftermath is equally heartbreaking. The victims' families found themselves stone-walled by the authorities when they demanded answers as to why the security apparatus failed the children so completely and when there would be any accountability for that. At least some of their questions have been answered now. Certainly the security forces have foiled many heinous plots but as the APS attack demonstrates, terrorists have to be lucky just once to negate those efforts.

Renewable energy

THE World Bank has shown Pakistan the way forward in the energy sector by approving \$450m to support the country's transition from expensive fossil fuels to affordable, renewable energy resources so that it can reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. Pakistan must use this opportunity as a policy impetus to encourage renewable, alternative energy schemes, and not just limit it to a few projects. The World Bank financing has been approved for hydropower and solar energy generation schemes in KP, which will shift the national energy mix to clean domestic resources. As stated by the bank's country director, the project will support Pakistan's goal to become a low-carbon, renewable energy-reliant economy by 2030 and target reduction in greenhouse gas emissions to combat climate change. This is in line with the international shift towards environment-friendly energy sources. The focus on indigenous resources would also contribute to the economic development of communities living near hydropower and solar projects by revitalising infrastructure, creating jobs and supporting the development of

tourism in those areas. Now it is for the government to use the bank's financing to scale up clean energy schemes in the rest of the country.

Sadly, the country's energy policymakers do not seem to have the capacity to plan beyond conventional dirty energy sources — coal, oil and gas. They seem to be out of touch with ongoing power technology developments and the availability of cheap renewable energy storage solutions, which are expected to change the scenario globally in the next several years. The Indicative Generation Capacity Expansion Plan, 2047, prepared by the NTDC, for example, focuses on costly generation-based coal and RLNG, while ignoring power technology that is set to dominate beyond 2030. The plan includes additions of renewables to meet the targets of the alternative energy policy, 2030, but neglects renewable resources in the overall energy mix beyond that. The overall contribution of renewables to the country's power capacity drops from 31pc in 2030 to 23pc in 2047, according to the IGCEP. A critique of the plan by an Australian organisation points to the "lack of renewable energy focus ... despite the fact that Pakistan has excellent renewable energy resources and ... wind and solar — which are already the cheapest source of new power generation in Pakistan — will be even cheaper throughout the 2030s and 2040s". Unless we cut our reliance on expensive fossil fuels and move towards renewable energy, the goals of sustainability and affordability cannot be met.

'South Sindh' province

AMIDST the growing clamour over the state's neglect of Karachi, the MQM-P has once again raised the controversial demand for the division of Sindh. While addressing a rally in the metropolis on Friday, the party's leadership renewed the call for the formation of a 'South Sindh' province to be carved out of Sindh's urban areas. The justification for this, as per the Muttahida, is the apparent step-motherly treatment urban Sindh receives from the PPP-led provincial government. While the MQM may have a point where the sad state of Karachi is concerned, calling for the division of Sindh may actually cause more problems than it will solve. Firstly, the PPP commands a comfortable position in the Sindh Assembly, which means securing a two-thirds majority in the provincial legislature — an essential constitutional requirement for the creation of a new federating unit — is next to impossible.

Secondly, and more importantly, this demand will increase the Sindhi-Mohajir communal divide in Sindh. Considering the fact that Sindh has suffered from significant episodes of ethnic violence over the last few decades, political players need to bridge divides, and not increase them.

It is true that the Sindh government has monopolised nearly all civic powers under the 2013 LG law, leaving the KMC practically toothless. The results of this can be seen in the dystopian state Karachi finds itself in today. However, it is also true that the MQM, which ruled Karachi and Hyderabad for decades, is an equal contributor to the destruction of urban Sindh. For example, land grabbing — commonly known as ‘china-cutting’ — in Karachi is a black art that was perfected under the MQM’s watch. Therefore, instead of indulging in divisive rhetoric that will only widen the ethnic divide, the MQM and all others who claim to represent urban Sindh must push for a better LG law which empowers civic administrations and gives them the necessary resources. Moreover, the PPP should also let devolution trickle down to the districts instead of centralising governance under the provincial administration.

At daggers drawn

WHILE it is true that the government may not be directly responsible for the arrest of Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif, the timing of his detention will surely feed into the opposition’s narrative of persecution and selective accountability.

NAB arrested Mr Sharif after his bail was cancelled by the Lahore High Court. His incarceration a week after the opposition’s multiparty conference had raised political temperatures at a time when the opposition is all set to launch its protest campaign against the PTI government.

The opposition had also boycotted a meeting convened by the speaker of the National Assembly to discuss elections in Gilgit-Baltistan and the meeting scheduled for Monday had to be cancelled. PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, while announcing the boycott of the meeting, had said the federal government should not be interfering in the GB elections.

The political situation has become tense since the MPC and the opposition's announcement of its public campaign. It was less than two weeks ago that leaders of all political parties had attended a meeting with army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and forged a consensus on giving GB provincial status after the elections scheduled for Nov 15. All leaders had also agreed to ensure that these elections are held in a free and transparent manner. However, this consensus is under strain as evidenced by the opposition's boycott of the speaker's meeting. The war of words has once again heated up. Things will get even more acrimonious with the arrest of Mr Sharif.

Pakistani politics is fast turning into a zero-sum game. The PTI leadership continues to call the opposition leadership a 'mafia' while the opposition has branded the government as a 'selected' one. Neither appears to accept the other's democratic credentials, and yet both are locked into a system that has to function till the next elections in 2023. It is, therefore, unfortunate that a normal working relationship between key stakeholders is almost non-existent.

After the speech of PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif, it appears that the establishment will also now face a barrage of criticism in the weeks to come. A system in perpetual conflict faces the danger of becoming dysfunctional. Pakistan cannot afford this. The only way to avoid dangerous instability is for the government to provide the opposition the democratic space that its mandate provides it. Fiery rhetoric and inflammatory accusations may suit the government politically but it is ill-suited for a system that is struggling to find stability.

The opposition for its part needs to keep in mind that it also carries the responsibility of ensuring that its protest and planned long march do not push matters to the brink. Personal dislikes should not be allowed to translate into official witch-hunting. All institutions must respect their constitutional limitations and work within the boundaries that have been clearly earmarked.

No press freedom

THE situation is bad enough if the press and citizens of a country are denied freedom of expression. It is at its worst if there is a system in place to ensure

they are deprived of this right. Pakistan is passing through such a phase, according to the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists. The union's Federal Executive Council on Sunday pointed a finger at the PTI government as it registered its "serious concern" over the "complete" denial of press freedom and freedom of speech and expression in the country. Its meeting in Quetta was among the most significant of its kind in PFUJ's history given the number of serious issues that it had on its agenda: freedom of expression, large-scale lay-offs and reductions in the salaries of workers in news organisations, the economic squeeze as a result of non-payment of dues and government policies, kidnapping of journalists, harassment of women journalists, the prolonged incarceration of a media house owner caught in a vicious accountability cycle. This is a long list even by the standards of a country where journalists' unions have been up against one challenge after another. It is quite clear from the questions raised that the government is not the only one on the list of those the PFUJ must be pursuing in an effort to get Pakistani journalists a better deal. But the government appears to be the chief offender.

A single sentence from the declaration issued at the conclusion of the three-day meeting says it all: "A systematic war has been launched by the government and anti-media forces to curb the freedom of expression and force the media houses to toe the official line or face the government's wrath." There could not have been a stronger call for the government to respond to this extremely distressing situation for both print and electronic media. The financial squeeze blamed on the government and an unabashed resort to old-style censorship by those who would never have been in power but for a vibrant media figured prominently in the PFUJ charge-sheet against the Imran Khan set-up that claims to draw its principles from the most tolerant of orders. They are there in the list along with the comparatively less highlighted kidnappers of newsmen. The kidnappers have been let off lightly with the mild sobriquet of 'anti-media forces'. Others in power have a serious job at hand to address PFUJ's concerns.

Covid-19 precautions

DURING the past couple of weeks, there has been an uptick in Covid-19 cases in the country. According to news reports, 74 new cases surfaced only

in Islamabad on Sunday. This is the highest increase in the number of cases for this month and is more than twice the total number of cases reported in KP for the same day. A few days after the reopening of schools, 34 children in three towns of central Punjab also tested positive for Covid-19. Moreover, the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences put off reopening its private wards after five doctors contracted the infection since the hospital's out-patient department started functioning again last month. Meanwhile, in Sindh, the provincial government's spokesperson held a news conference on Monday to share his concern over the rising incidence of Covid-19. He said that in the past two weeks alone, the ratio of coronavirus-positive patients had risen from 1pc to 2.6pc, and lamented that the public had mostly stopped taking all precautions. Balochistan has also seen a sharp increase with Covid-19 cases tripling between August and September to reach May levels, while in KP, seven teachers tested positive for the infection earlier last week.

This resurgence in cases can indeed be attributed to the public's complacent attitude after lockdowns were lifted. It appears that with the easing of restrictions and resumption of educational and business activities, people are under the impression that the pandemic is now a thing of the past, when in fact the global death toll from Covid-19 has crossed the million mark. Some government officials believe that the increase in the number of cases is a reflection of ramped-up testing. This can only mean that earlier figures were hugely undercounted as a result of less testing. The authorities need to be just as proactive in the implementation of SOPs now as they were about enforcing lockdowns when initial cases were reported — that is, if they want to prevent a second wave of Covid-19 in the country.

Maryam in the mix

NEVER the ideal indulgence for the fainthearted, politics in Pakistan may be poised to enter a real action-packed phase. This is indicated by the tone of important opposition politicians and reconfirmed by the rigid response of the current custodians of the system. The latest, as anticipated, Shahbaz Sharif has been arrested and Maryam Nawaz has spoken. Mr Shahbaz 'in' the lock-up and Ms Nawaz 'out' in the open could actually mean Shahbaz left 'out' of the game to ponder over latest reconciliatory techniques and Ms Nawaz being 'in-charge'. Those willing the PML-N to take the more

adventurous route are so excited to see their leader's daughter assume the mantle. Already, it has been presumed that the most daring and never trodden road to salvation that Nawaz Sharif and Ms Nawaz have been promising to take is beckoning as a real possibility. In the time since the new potential 'in-charge' of the House of Sharif's political affairs declared 'war' on those on the other side of the divide, the stress has been on finding signs that will determine just how strong a punch the opposition can make of it. The opposition leaders say the fight is inevitable, and given the resolve of the accountability people, and frankly considering the one-sidedness of the drive in the name of rooting out the corrupt, the general belief would be that a big collision is imminent.

The cases against top-notch opposition leaders are at a critical stage and their parties cannot afford to just sit and watch the proceedings passively. Ms Nawaz and other opposition politicians have linked the intensification of the government's 'biased' accountability swoop on forthcoming elections for the Gilgit-Baltistan assembly. The Senate polls due next March would certainly be a much bigger reason for the further heating up of the political scene. However, the genuineness of causes and the change in the mood of any opposition politician with howsoever big a following cannot guarantee strength to the push against the government. Most crucially here, the target has to be selected carefully, what with so much talk about there being a hybrid regime in place.

A telltale clue to just how tough matters can turn out to be was provided by none other than Ms Nawaz in Monday's presser. The PML-N workers she inspires must have been hoping this was the moment the defiant leader in her came of age. Their spirits might have been lifted by glimpses of that leader flashing from the stage, but for the first time perhaps she betrayed another side to her — the side which told her not everyone could carry the weight of the narrative she and her father have championed. Perhaps a bit of Shahbaz Sharif coming in to temper a Nawaz Sharif protégé? Ultimately, it is always this mix that determines the future course.

Unrepentant sexism

UNDETERRED by the outrage over his earlier callous remarks, CCPO Lahore Umar Sheikh once again exposed his sexist views on how women should behave when he appeared before a Senate panel this week.

Mr Sheikh was briefing the Senate Functional Committee on Human Rights about progress on the case of a woman who was gang-raped in front of her children near the Lahore motorway, when he decided to indulge in the same victim-blaming exercise he was earlier vehemently — and correctly — criticised for. The CCPO claimed the woman set out for home at 1:30am 'as she had gone to Lahore without seeking permission from her husband and was returning home out of fear of him'.

PPP Senator Krishna Kumari Kohli rebuked Mr Sheikh over his comment, saying he should not make such assumptions. When asked whether the victim had told him she was travelling without her husband's permission, the CCPO shockingly said he was guessing it was so. That a top police official who blatantly and repeatedly fuels rape culture is tasked with solving this case is unacceptable.

What makes things worse is that despite being a repeat offender when it comes to dishing out unsolicited, victim-blaming 'advice', he enjoys the patronage and protection in the higher echelons of the Punjab government's. Why does Mr Sheikh — an officer who has failed to nab the second suspect and has on multiple public occasions shown how incapable he is of understanding the fundamentals of a crime like rape — still have his job?

The women of this country are furious, frightened and simply fed up with the way the conversation about their safety is framed. In any civilised society, would the victim of a terror attack or shooting be blamed for leaving their home or for venturing out without permission? Why then are victims of rape, already uniquely vulnerable, blamed for their assault?

The CCPO must be sacked if the government wants to inspire any public confidence about solving this case. Citizens ought to have the assurance that a responsible, sensitised official is in charge of their safety. There is a dire need to sensitise the police force when it comes to violence against women, as they are often the first responders at crime scenes. Among other

things, they must refrain at all costs from blaming the victim, trivialising the incident, passing judgement on a woman's appearance or, like Mr Sheikh, 'teaching' women how to avoid getting raped.

Looming wheat crisis

PAKISTAN could face a major wheat crisis by the end of December. The warning has come from the National Assembly Standing Committee on Commerce, which also pointed out that serious mismanagement in planning of wheat imports had caused shortages of the commodity, leading to a big hike in flour prices. The government had allowed the Trading Corporation of Pakistan and the private sector to import wheat towards the end of July in the wake of its countrywide shortages, and later waived all taxes and duties to make imports economically viable and release the upward pressure on its prices. Yet the imports remain slow.

Although the private sector has imported over 300,000 tonnes of wheat and booked orders for another million tonnes or so, the TCP is yet to place its first order. A top TCP official told the committee that the corporation, which is supposed to purchase 1.5m tonnes of cereal from the international market to fill the supply gap, had to cancel the tenders floated earlier this month because of the high rates quoted by suppliers. The new bids received for 300,000 tonnes of wheat are to be opened on Oct 5, which means the first TCP wheat shipment will not reach here before the end of October even if everything goes according to plan. Until then, prices are expected to stay up despite private imports. The consumers, especially low-income households, are forced to pay a higher price for their staple food because of delays in imports on account of the government failing to predict the market despite less than targeted crop output last spring. Even when it was clear the country was facing a shortfall of 1.5m tonnes for the current market year and prices had begun surging sharply, it did not push the TCP to speed up the import process. The TCP authorities will have to do exactly that if the government wants to prevent the present shortages from morphing into a major crisis in winter.